

HER PLACE
IN THE WORLD

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THE OLD WOMAN WHO LIVED IN A SHOE.
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BETHIA WRAY'S NEW NAME.
IN THE KING'S COUNTRY.

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BY

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ADRIANCE," "OUT OF THE WRECK," "LARRY" "BETHIA WRAY'S
NEW NAME," "HOPE MILLS," ETC.

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HER PLACE IN THE WORLD



CHAPTER I

OPPOSING FORCES

It certainly was a very helpless looking burthen that Royal Palmer brought into Aunt Hannah's keeping room and deposited in the chintz-covered Boston rocker. A pretty pink and white baby face emerged from a blue veil, and disclosed an abundance of fluffy golden hair, soft, appealing, blue eyes, a round dimpled chin, that quivered in a moment of emotion, and to a thoughtful person bespoke excess of sentiment and latent obstinacy. The kind of person you think you can govern easily, and who invariably ends by governing you.

Aunt Hannah Gage looked through her glasses, and then over them. The strong, shrewd, and not uncomely face betrayed a variety of emotions, but the strongest seemed surprise.

"You don't mean to say that's Betty Deane!" she exclaimed bluntly.

"My name is *not* Betty, but Bessie," the small creature declared emphatically. "I was christened Bessie."

"It's all one, I'm sure, only Bessie has a new-fangled sound."

"But it isn't all one," interrupted the newcomer. "My mother's name was Elizabeth, and she was called Betty, so she determined no one should have an excuse for calling me out of my proper name."

"Aunt Hannah," and Roy gave an embarrassed laugh, "is this your welcome?" He had been very much taken with the stranger, though up to the moment of seeing her he had secretly objected to the turn of affairs.

"A poor welcome to a motherless and fatherless bairn," and she flushed at her lack of kindness. "But you are so different from what I fancied, and I was so struck at seeing Roy bring you in his arms! I hope you will be content, and learn to like us and the place."

"Roy carried me because the path was wet."

She glanced up with a frankness so winsome that Roy thought her lovely.

"Yes, it was quite a shower, but it is clearing up now. You must be tired, travelling all day. I'll have supper ready soon; so take off your things." And Aunt Hannah's voice softened a little.

"Shall I take her trunk up-stairs?" asked Roy, in a kind of nervous, man-fashion.

"Why — yes."

"I will go, too."

Bessie Deane rose with a touch of dignity. She was of medium size, but gave one the impression of being petite. She had an air of command, that sat oddly on her, like a child aping its elders. Roy shouldered the smallish trunk, and, balancing it with one hand, picked up the bag with the other. Aunt Hannah followed with the lamp she had just lighted, and Bessie walked rather sulkily at the end of the procession.

The stairs were wide, and at the landing met a flight that came from the main hall. Then a turn, and the party were ushered into a neat room, with a rag carpet that was quite a work of art in fineness and harmony of color, an old-fashioned mahogany bedstead, and bureau. But the white spread was real quilting, and the window curtains were of forty-year-old dimity.

"Here's a nice closet; and I've emptied that bureau; and here's a pitcher of water. Now I'll run down and finish cooking supper, and you come as soon as you are ready."

Roy had set down the trunk with a thump. Bessie turned to him and said, "Thank you!" in a charmingly gracious fashion, and he felt her

eyes were following him. It brought a smile and a tint of color to his face.

Bessie took a survey of her room, and glanced out of the window, after she had thrown her sacque and hat on the bed.

"She's a regular old termagant, one can see that," she thought. "I am glad I stood up for my name in the beginning," setting her lips firmly together, and drawing her brows into a dainty scowl. "I suppose she will think because she gives me a home—and the house isn't hers, either. Royal Palmer! That's a nice name, and I *know* I shall like him. But she's an old screw. I dare say she will expect me to slave for my board. Churning and scrubbing! She'll see!" with a little laugh. "I shall not begin any such nonsense. I wouldn't mind dusting a room, or wiping china and silver—but the china, I dare say, comes out only on state occasions. I suppose she was vexed because Roy carried me. How nice and strong his arms were! I wonder if he is engaged? Would I like to be a farmer's wife?"

She pulled out the fluffy bang, hunted through the valise for a fresh necktie, a pale blue, that gave her an almost angelic look. And she wondered, with the untrained romance of seventeen.

For foolish Bessie Deane had been through her

first love affair. She had listened to some very passionate love making from a man who admitted he was too poor to marry for years to come, and she did not care to help a man work his way up. The sweet face did not look mercenary, but so far she and life had battled rather sharply.

Aunt Hannah's father had married in his old age, and his common-sense, practical daughter had been deeply mortified. But he only lived a year or so, and the new Mrs. Gage went to her people, with her baby girl, and soon married again, so the little child was always called Bessie Deane, and was very well taken care of for years. But her mother died, and Mr. Deane married again. The step-mother thought the three children burthen enough, so Mr. Deane wrote to Miss Hannah Gage, and proposed to return her half-sister.

Miss Gage had a little money of her own, and went out as housekeeper for Mrs. Palmer, who had been disabled with a stroke of paralysis, but she outlived her husband in spite of it. Aunt Hannah was like a sister to her. After her death she went on housekeeping for Roy.

Westhorpe was a pretty, sleepy, romantic old place, with the aristocratic advantage of being the county town. There was a lovely river winding through it, a mountain ridge toward the north, with some pretty cascades and pools where another

stream wound picturesquely down to join the river. Boarders had found it out.

The Misses Brooke, rather elderly spinsters, had spent two summers in the place. But now Mrs. Garth had enlarged her house and had a large party coming. They preferred quiet, and wanted to bring their niece with them, so they begged Mrs. Garth to find them a place.

She came over to Aunt Hannah—the whole neighborhood called her that—and besought her to take them.

“They’re such nice plain people, not a bit of trouble, and not wanting citified ways, nor much waiting on, except their carriage ride every afternoon. Thirty dollars a week for the three, and they are very fond of vegetables and fresh eggs and fruit, and la! you’d never miss what they eat. There’s your two big empty rooms, and they would just enjoy your living, you’re so clean and tidy. And really, it would be most all profit. I am quite sure Liny Ferris would come and live with you to wait on the table and such like. From June until the middle of September. You’re such a good manager you’d make over two hundred dollars clear—nearer three.”

Roy rather favored the idea. “We’ll divide the profits even, Aunt Hannah,” he said laughingly. “You give the labor and I’ll do the providing.

Fifteen weeks. Four hundred and fifty dollars. Whew ! ”

Just as they had about decided, she was surprised by Mr. Deane's letter. She had heard nothing since Mrs. Deane's death.

“ It's curious,” she said to Roy, “ but I never could feel that she was any relation. And father willed her all the little he had. I shouldn't have had a penny if Uncle James hadn't left me that thousand dollars. I was thirty-eight when father married, and I had taken good care of him and mother. I didn't think I was rightly treated. But she went flying off, and the next thing we heard she had married that Mr. Deane. All the money must have been spent, for he says the girl hasn't anything, and as I am her half-sister—I am ashamed of that, too; flighty young thing of seventeen!—I ought to look after her.”

“ Well, let her come here. She may be some help to you. Why, see here, Aunt Hannah, if you should take the Brookes, it would be just the thing ! ”

“ Yes ” — reluctantly — “ if she is good for anything. Her mother wasn't. And those people ought to have trained her for something; put her in a shop or given her a trade. Roy, I really don't want her. It is hard-hearted, I know. And it is not right for you to take care of her.”

"Oh, she will earn her keep. She will be better than that Ferris girl, who is only fourteen. But I do not see as you have much choice," smiling. "Mr. Deane is going to Canada with his family, and if the present Mrs. Deane doesn't want her —

"She might be useful with a family of children. *Her* mother ought to have made some provision for her. And that man had whatever money there was."

Still there was nothing for Bessie, it seemed, but to come. The present Mrs. Deane thought her sister the proper one to look after her.

Aunt Hannah had not allowed herself to expect much, but she *was* disappointed.

"I don't believe she is good for anything. I always despised that kind of yellow hair. And babyish ways! I never gave a thought to Roy, but surely he can't be weak enough to be caught by such a simpleton! That's just what she is, Bessie, forsooth!"

Aunt Hannah sniffed indignantly. And yet the girl was her own kin.

The supper was ready when Roy came in. The table was set in the kitchen. But it was a large, clean, airy kitchen with no marks of servitude, since a week before the range had been taken out to the "shed," as the summer kitchen was esteemed. The best rag carpet was put down, and the

was a drain and a water faucet through on the other side. The fireplace was whitewashed and a box of ferns stood in it. There were white curtains at the windows, and quaint old rush-bottomed chairs painted yellow, four of them being armchairs. It was a good enough living room, though they used the other on state occasions. Across the hall were two rooms again, but one had the old-fashioned high-post bedstead just as it had been left at Grandmother Palmer's death, and was used as a guest chamber, though Roy kept his desk and his business papers there, and last winter had added a bookcase.

"What do you suppose keeps that girl?" she exclaimed impatiently, glancing up at the young man.

"Perhaps she is making herself pretty to disarm you," with a mischievous glint in his eye.

"Well—she needn't. Handsome is as handsome does—to my mind. And I shall try and make her useful though she doesn't look good for much."

"Don't be too hard on her, Aunt Hannah," said Roy, with a kind of tender good humor that was part of his nature. Everything needing protection seemed to gravitate to him naturally.

"I don't want to be *hard*, Royal Palmer. I never was hard to *her*"—that meant. Bessie's

mother; "but I can't afford to keep her a lady, and I've no fortune to give her. And if she shouldn't like housework — modern girls despise it," and there was a fling in Aunt Hannah's voice, "I'll see if Miss Cummings won't take her at dress-making. She must have some way of getting her living. Helpless, wishy-washy women on the lookout for husbands are my abomination! I pity the men who get them!"

"But you don't pity the men who want capable women."

Aunt Hannah really colored up. Westhorpe was not in ignorance of that episode, happening only a few years ago, when Aunt Hannah was sorely wanted.

"I always took it as a compliment that Rachel Marks wanted me to be stepmother to her children. Rachel was a nice, sensible body, but I never could see how she made up her mind to Silas. I'd have done it for her sake and the children's if I could."

Aunt Hannah was growing impatient now. She opened the stair door and called in a quick tone:

"Bessie Deane, will you come to supper!"

Bessie Deane, to show her independent spirit, still lingered.

"Sit down," said Aunt Hannah, peremptorily. "We shall not wait for a slip of a girl."

She had poured the tea and passed the bread when Bessie entered.

"I am glad I did not keep you waiting," in a soft, winsome voice, with a deprecating glance at Roy.

"No," answered Aunt Hannah, in a brief, decisive tone. "We were ready and sat down. Do you take cream and sugar in your tea?"

Bessie answered in a rather ignoble affirmative. Then she tried to make some conversation with Roy, but he did not seem in the mood. Or was he afraid of this tall, stern-looking ogre; a very masculine sort of woman, Bessie decided. He had been chatty enough on the homeward drive.

Afterward he walked down to the post-office for the mail, and for the talk he would have with Bernard Ward. Aunt Hannah took Tim's supper out in the shed kitchen. Part of this was floored, and all but one end lathed and plastered. That side was piled almost up to the ceiling — the roof slanted considerably — with wood, split and sawed in even lengths. There were various barrels and one closet for storing away things. A long wash bench, and a pine table with two wooden chairs comprised the furniture. Then she brought in a small cedar tub and washed her tea things.

"What pretty china," Bessie ventured, not wanting to be entirely ignored.

"Yes, Mr. Palmer bought it at a vendue; it was old Mrs. Pratt's. All the things went cheap."

"Is he — is Mr. Palmer some relation to you?" with a sudden hope it might be so.

"No; I'm housekeeper only. I came here when Mrs. Palmer had her stroke. She and I had been friends for years. And then when both were dead I went on — he wanted a housekeeper. Some day he'll have a wife," in a dry sort of tone, "but I am not so old but that I can get something else."

Bessie took a survey of her. To seventeen she seemed an old woman, but at fifty-seven she was still brisk and strong. Her hair was white and quite abundant, but brushed plainly above her ears. She wore a dark gingham dress and a white apron, and there was a bit of white ruffle about her neck. She was not attractive to Bessie, nor in the least sympathetic.

Tim ate his supper and wished them "good night" with a touch of his hand to his forelock, which he had learned as a boy at school and it answered for the more cordial nod. He always went home to sleep.

Aunt Hannah settled herself and brought out some knitting — white cotton shells for a counterpane. She abhorred idleness, and the half lounging figure in the old rocking chair rasped her.

"What have you learned to do?" she asked presently.

"Do?" repeated Bessie, "I went to school until Christmas. Then there was so much trouble with the failure, and one servant was sent away. Why, I did a little of everything. Papa—I call him papa," and she sighed, "thought I might do for a teacher. It was my second year in the high school. But I always told him I should just hate teaching."

"I suppose you've learned to sew?"

"Oh, I've done Kensington work and different embroideries," with a rather lofty air.

"But your clothes and mending?"

"Oh, we always had a dressmaker, and bought muslin things ready made. Kitty always darned stockings until she went away. It was awfully hard to do without her. There were seven children in all — three of my own mamma's and four of Mrs. Deane's. And I didn't really belong to anybody."

"Mr. Deane was — quite well-to-do?" ventured Aunt Hannah. "At least until the failure?"

"I suppose so! We had what we wanted and two servants, and a laundress coming in on Monday."

"Well, there'll be nothing like it here," said Aunt Hannah, grimly; "you'll have to begin to earn your own living."

"I shouldn't know how," rather flippantly.

"Then you must learn. You must do your own sewing and darn your stockings."

"I hate darned stockings! They are all in bunches," Bessie declared, with emphasis.

"I'll show you how to darn so they won't be in bunches. You can't begin too soon. I work for my living. And in about a week or so there are some boarders coming."

"Oh," retorted Bessie, with a touch of insolence, "does Mr. Palmer keep boarders?"

"*I shall keep them,*" was the quietly firm reply. "And if you decide through the summer that you don't like housework, there are other things. I really shall not need your help when the boarders go away. A girl who has nothing must learn to take care of herself."

Bessie sat confounded. Her life plan was to get married as soon as a decent opportunity offered. What was Westhorpe like? Were there many young men in the place? A relative of Mr. Palmer's housekeeper—of that strong, commonplace woman!

Bessie was inclined to burst into a passion of tears. But with some inward intuition she knew it would not touch Miss Gage. She wanted whatever she did to affect some one. The other person's emotion entertained her quite as much as her own. She gave a great yawn instead.

"I should like to go to bed," she exclaimed. "I am awfully tired."

"I expect you are." Aunt Hannah lighted a candle for her. "Be careful to hold it straight," she counselled; "spermaceti is the worst thing in the world to get on your clothes or the carpet. Can you find your way up? We rise early, but you won't be in the traces yet to-morrow morning."

"I'm a dreadfully late sleeper," was the rejoinder. "Good night," as she was on the stair.

"Good night," said Aunt Hannah.

But the woman set her lips firmly together afterward. "She'll marry the first man that asks her," Aunt Hannah said. "Heaven forbid that she should wreck any good man's life." And there was one young man dearer to her than this girl, even if she was her half-sister, her own father's child.

Bessie did cry a little when she had shut her door. Everything was so common, so hard. She could have gone to Canada. Mrs. Deane had proposed that she become a sort of governess and seamstress. *They* could not afford to keep her in idleness. Mrs. Deane had been carelessly good-natured in prosperity, though she did not see that this girl had any real claim upon her husband, now that she was grown.

Adversity did not sweeten her at all. No wonder, poor woman, with all her cares. Bessie thought her grown quite captious and fretful and stingy. She preferred the unknown future, and somehow she pictured Miss Hannah Gage as a queer old woman with a good deal of money that would be hers presently.

CHAPTER II

A POSSIBLE ATTRACTION

WHEN Bessie awoke the next morning the sun had been up a long while. Her fatigue and the quiet with no children astir in the early morning, conduced to slumber. She hurried on her clothes, for she felt really startled.

And when she opened the kitchen door the clock on the mantel pointed to nearly half past eight. Everything was in immaculate order. Aunt Hannah sat by the open window working some lovely golden butter that diffused a fragrance about the room.

"Oh!" she cried in dismay.

Aunt Hannah half smiled. She had a more cheerful look in this light print dress than in her dark afternoon gingham.

"I had no idea it was so late —"

"Well, you were tired. And it didn't make any difference. Mr. Palmer had to go down to Knowlton on some business, and we had an early breakfast. Generally it is at seven, but his train went at that time."

Aunt Hannah rose, patting the butter in a golden ball, and leaning the bowl against her side, with her arm over it. It was a good firm arm, with the sleeve rolled above the elbow.

"I wonder what you would like for breakfast? There's cold chicken. We had biscuits, but they are cold. I could put them in the oven a minute. And I'll make a cup of fresh coffee."

"Don't trouble about anything, please. When we came down to breakfast at home we took what there was. And you might give it to me out here."

She had followed Aunt Hannah to the shed kitchen.

"Well, there is a clean cloth in that drawer, and the big closet there — no, that's a pantry — that's the dish closet. Get any plate and cup, then come down cellar with me."

The cellar was cool and clean as the world after yesterday's rain. Aunt Hannah laid her butter in a stone jar, found the plate of chicken, some potatoes, and some stewed fruit. Bessie helped carry them up. The potatoes were fried in a trice. The biscuit were heated. It was a breakfast fit for a king — better than that at the Deanes'.

"You are very good not to scold," said Bessie, rather conscience smitten.

"I am not much of a scold, as any one can tell you. But there isn't much to scold about here.

And now if you're done, take the chicken downstairs, and the butter."

Bessie obeyed cheerfully. Really, Aunt Hannah wasn't so bad! Perhaps there was a right side to her.

Then they went up-stairs. Over the parlor part were two large rooms, with spacious closets. On the other side three not as large. Roy had moved over, and the two rooms were to be put in order for the newcomers. There was a small-figured ingrain carpet on the floor.

"There is to be a new set of furniture for this room. Miss—let me see—her name is Otis. Her mother was a Brooke."

"Her father should have been a river." Bessie was frightened at her own small wit, but Aunt Hannah gave a short half-laugh.

"He wasn't, though. Her mother's dead, and her father's been getting married again. The two ladies think there is no summer place like Westhorpe."

"I suppose they are rich," said Bessie, enviously.

"Well, yes. They are real ladies. No shoddy about them. Real old quality people."

They dusted and straightened things and chatted in quite a friendly fashion. Aunt Hannah had taken counsel of her good judgment as she churned and worked her butter. Bessie should have no

chance to make a martyr of herself, nor appeal to Roy Palmer's sympathies. She should be put in a comfortable place and left there, and Roy should not begin by pitying her.

In the afternoon they drove "down town." They were quite at one side of Westhorpe. The town was pretty, clean, and with a refined air, for there was not much business. Bessie noted that the people they met paid a certain respect to Miss Gage, as if she was something more than a house-keeper, as indeed she was.

Mr. Palmer did not return until quite late and had his supper alone. Then he took out his paper, and had very little to say. Bessie's conversational powers had heretofore been exercised upon the floating gossip of city doings—what was being played at the theatre, the last ball match, meeting this one and that one, and the silly nothings crude young people exchange. She wondered if Roy Palmer wasn't rather slow. If she could only see him alone!

She was up quite early the next morning, and they breakfasted together. But there was corn to plant, and off he went again.

Word came that day that the Brookes would be earlier than they thought. June came in on Tuesday, but they would reach Westhorpe on Saturday, if it would be convenient.

When her duties were explained to Bessie she inwardly resented some of them.

"I could order a house," she said, "but I do not think I have any gift for the drudgery part."

"The woman who does not know all about the work does not know how to order. Incompetent mistresses make poor servants. Still, I'm free to confess that it isn't every woman who has a genius for housekeeping. It's bad to get at the wrong thing. I've seen a good farmer spoiled in a poor minister or lawyer. And you're so tasty looking I do think you'd make a good dressmaker. Only it seems to me that women who hate to do housework oughtn't undertake it and spoil a man's life. She owes him some consideration."

"When I marry it will be a man rich enough to keep a servant."

Aunt Hannah nodded in a dubious sort of fashion. "Then don't marry a farmer," she said decisively.

Bessie had a pretty, graceful way with her. She made a room look homelike, took the stiffness out of it by a few little turns. She knew how much more effective flowers of a kind were by themselves than everything in a bunch. She had an eye for color and harmony. Aunt Hannah was not a hard or straight-laced woman and did not consider beauty foolishness, though it seemed to her there was a

great deal that was not beautiful at all. She had the inner sense, but lacked the power of expression.

Roy went over to the station at four, with the big carriage, and Tim was to take the wagon for the trunks. Aunt Hannah had gone through Bessie's wardrobe and bought her two nice print gowns. She had two rather shabby silks, that had been "evening gowns," and a white one much furbelowed. There was her spring suit of light gray, which would do for her church and wearing dress until hot weather. The others were winter attire of no special use now.

"There's nothing like good wash prints for a girl like you," said Aunt Hannah.

Bessie had hoped so to achieve a new silk, and was appalled when lawn was mentioned in its place.

She sat on the porch where the roses were just coming out. There was a wide, hard path down to the gate, with a flower border on each side. Some blossoming shrubbery, some trees and a good deal of grass that Aunt Hannah called a dooryard, and the lawn. At the side of the house was a wide drive.

The carriage came up. There was a Miss Brooke, tall and still fair, with a gracious but rather aristocratic mien, sixty or thereabout; Miss Esther, five or six years younger, not so tall, her hair light but scarcely turned, very delicate

looking, almost frail. The young lady sat on the front seat with the host.

She looked twenty, but she was only a month past nineteen. Tall, like her aunts, a proudly poised head, a face at once noble, dignified and so reticent you hardly thought of its beauty. A rather long oval with finely cut features, very dark blue eyes, with black lashes, a great coil of dusky hair with a little irregular fringe that added softness to the broad forehead. Bessie felt disappointed. It was not at all what she had hoped. A city girl whose people were not strenuously fashionable promised something to her imagination. This one lived in a mysterious realm quite above her, and she wanted people on her own level.

And it seemed to her in this brief while that Roy Palmer had changed. He sat very erect, and there was a dignity Bessie had never taken into account, never noted, perhaps. It roused a curious smouldering jealousy, as if he might drift out of her region.

Miss Helen Otis was a trifle surprised as well. She had come to Westhorpe to bury sorrow. She would have no taste for gayeties, for this great grief of her life had changed everything.

She was only ten when her mother died, who had been the youngest Miss Brooke, much

younger than the two sisters. Helen had been at school, and sometimes spent her vacations with them. Indeed, their house was her real home; but now and then she took a journey with her father. He was a fine looking man, only forty now, an intelligent and polished business man, finding some time for the social amenities of life, and being very fond of his daughter.

Helen had graduated from her boarding-school the year before. She had been fired with some girlish ambitions, and had a secret longing to enter college. But her father said:—

“Helen, I shall have to go abroad the first of July. We three partners take turns. Of course there will be a good deal of business for the first two months, but I shall no doubt find some friends in Paris and on the Continent who can keep you from feeling neglected. After that we can take a pleasure tour. What say you?”

Of course she was delighted. She had a splendid time, and adored her father more than ever. In Berlin they met quite a circle of her father's acquaintances. Among them a Miss Carew of three or four and thirty, a music teacher, who had given up this year for the restoration of her health and energy, and was looking into new methods of teaching. She proved a very attractive companion.

Mr. Otis returned the last of December, leaving his daughter to go to Egypt with some friends in whom he had every confidence. Oddly enough Miss Carew crossed on the same vessel. She had been summoned home on the death of a relative and was to receive a considerable legacy.

Beside her musical ability she was well read and very attractive. He had been thinking it was time now to give up his half bachelor ways, his suite of rooms at the hotel, and make a home for his daughter. He began to feel quite fatherly. And why not put this sweet, well-bred woman at the head of it, and give Helen several charming years before she would want to marry? She must have a chaperon of some sort. Her aunts were quite out of touch with the modern world, and Miss Esther was too frail to undertake any dissipation. A younger woman, who understood the ways and needs of girls—but it was not likely Miss Carew would come, except in one capacity.

He continued the acquaintance after they were in New York, and found that he was really in love with her. She accepted him, but would not be married until Helen returned. That was in May.

Helen's first feeling was indignation. Her father was a good deal surprised, but he pointed out the advantages, to which she was blind. She felt herself deceived and injured, and with a girl's

unreason, blamed Miss Carew. Aunt Margaret tried to reason with her. "Nothing is more natural, my dear. Your mother has been dead almost eight years, and few men respect a memory that long. Beside, at his time of life he needs a home, and, really, a wife."

"But I could have made his home," sobbed Helen, between sorrow and anger. "I had counted on it; I meant to devote my life to it."

"My dear," returned Aunt Margaret, gravely, but with a certain persuasive sweetness, "that would hardly have been possible. You are too inexperienced. You know nothing about ordering a house. You could not entertain your father's friends without some older lady —"

"But you and Aunt Esther might have come," interrupted the girl.

Aunt Margaret sighed. She had always liked her brother-in-law very much, but they were almost at the opposite ends of the society scale. He was still a fashionable man, much admired and much sought after, and had kept his place without a break. They tried to do honor to a few occasions among relatives and older friends, but they had cheerfully "stepped out of the swim." Miss Esther's poor health, and her own age, her disinclination for gayeties would make her a poor chaperon.

"My child, you need a younger person, who is fresh in society ways. We have been much pleased with Miss Carew. Your father desires a home and a wife, and you will no doubt marry."

"I meant to devote my whole life to him. We had such a delightful time abroad. And his letters since have been so charming! I had learned to love him so! Why, every thought of his heart seemed mine, and instead, he was loving another. He has deceived me! And she has crept in —"

"My dear, do not say that," entreated Aunt Margaret. "It was a delicate subject to write about. And I do think you will find her a kind and appreciative friend. She is still young enough to enjoy the things of youth without being worried by them."

But Helen would not be consoled or convinced. She met Miss Carew coldly. It was a church wedding, and Helen went in carriage attire and sat with her aunts. Mr. and Mrs. Otis were to make a tour of the Lakes and Canada, coming down the Maine coast to Bar Harbor, where a cousin of Miss Carew's had a cottage. If Helen would meet them there, and then make a sojourn at some of the watering-places?

But Helen very stiffly elected to go with her aunts. She kept considering herself the victim of an underhand and deceitful arrangement. Her

love for her father had received a hard blow, and she kept nursing it up in bitterness. She wanted no gayeties, she would have nothing but seclusion and sorrow.

"I am very glad," she said, when the change was made to the Palmer house, and Miss Gage warmly praised to them. Miss Brooke couldn't remember, but she fancied Mr. Palmer quite an elderly gentleman, and Helen never gave him a second thought.

But when he said in a cordial manner, "I am Mr. Palmer," Miss Otis almost forgot her exquisite breeding and stared.

She was rather given to be analytical, like many seriously educated young people. The strong, well-developed figure, the shapely hands, the clear-cut grave face lighted by smiling hazel eyes, interested her. His hair had a tint of chestnut and was curling; his mustache was a warm brown with golden ends, and of course he was sunburned, but his white forehead betrayed his fair skin.

He assisted the two ladies into the carriage, they took the back seat; then Helen, and, after giving Tim orders about the luggage, sprang in lightly beside her.

"I believe," said Miss Brooke, "you are a little farther out of the town than Mrs. Garth."

"Quite on the outskirts, the farming district,"

and he smiled, "but we are on such high ground we overlook the town. I hope you will not feel lonely — our family is small."

There was a dignified assurance in his manner. His horses were handsome and spirited, obedient to the slightest touch. He pointed out some beautiful views, and, though the ascent was not much, they soon saw the rows of houses and gardens quite below them.

Mrs. Garth had come over to meet them and introduce them to Miss Gage. Aunt Hannah seemed just the name for the every-day, motherly woman, Miss Otis thought.

There had been a curious little puzzle about the relationship of Bessie and her half-sister, compromised by Bessie insisting she should say Aunt Hannah. Miss Gage thought it would be less likely to call to mind her father's foolish marriage, so she merely said, "My niece, Miss Deane."

"I'll show you to your rooms," said Miss Gage, and preceded them up-stairs.

Everything was in attractive order; Bessie had moved the chairs about a little, put bunches of greenery in each fireplace, a bowl of flowers on one table, and a tall vase on the other. From the side windows you looked out to the ranges of hills, rising one above the other, here a ledge of brown rocks; here a gray mass of perpendicular, looking

like fluted columns, and there a great round peak that suggested a volcano.

"It is beautiful," declared Helen; "I shall like my room so much; I am so glad I came with you."

Tim and his master brought up the trunks. There was a manliness about Roy Palmer, a grace in doing common things that interested Helen.

"I suppose that is the Mr. Palmer?" she asked with a half-smile, "but I am rather sorry he isn't an elderly man."

"I am very much surprised;" and Miss Brooke really was, but she began to arrange the pillows on the lounge, and gently put Esther down, who was extremely tired with the journey.

Bessie came up with a tray holding a pitcher of fresh water and some glasses.

"And that is a pretty girl," continued Helen, "but she has a rather weak, self-willed face. Do you suppose there is no servant?"

"This is not a very easy place to get servants if I remember rightly," said Miss Brooke. "The farmer's daughters are all averse to taking situations, and only the poorest help seem to find the way here."

"We might have brought Barbara," returned Esther.

"We could send for her if we needed her. But

I have found that in boarding a servant is a great deal of trouble."

"And I am to be your maid to help pass away the time, you know," said Helen, affectionately.

She and her aunt unpacked. The drawers had a fragrance of rose leaves and lavender. The closets were capacious, and would each hold a trunk. Helen had brought a portfolio of engravings and a few ornamental articles with which she adorned the mantel, the top of a half closet set by the chimney jamb, and her bureau.

Miss Gage knocked at the door.

"I wish you'd be kind enough to tell me which you prefer — taking your meals by yourselves, or with us. There would be Mr. Palmer and my niece —" she would not put Bessie in a servant's place.

Miss Gage looked so clean and tidy, so really inviting, that Miss Brooke said: —

"Oh, all together; you must not let us make too much trouble. My sister will occasionally have her meals sent up."

"She had better to-night," returned Miss Gage. "She looks clear tired out. Mrs. Garth said she wasn't strong. Can anybody help you?"

"If this trunk and the box could be taken away —" in a tone of softened request.

Miss Gage pulled them out in the hall, and they heard them rumbling off.

About six the bell rang. Bessie came up with a tray. There was toast, two dainty biscuits, cold chicken and ham, and a dish of luscious berries, a little pot of tea, and a pretty Japanese cup. She set it on a table with a flush, as she saw Helen glance at her.

The ladies followed her down. Mr. Palmer had on a clean linen coat, and a pale blue necktie which was very becoming. And though no waiter stood behind the chairs, the serving seemed very complete, and the table was beyond cavil.

They saw no more of the ladies that evening. Bessie had made some acquaintances already, and the young people went out on Saturday evening for a walk. A neighbor called for Bessie, and Aunt Hannah was very glad to have an errand done. Jane Moore was too steady going to let Bessie get far astray.

Roy came and sat down on the kitchen step beside Aunt Hannah. There was a laughing sound in his voice as he tossed back his tumbled hair.

"Well, you were not extinguished."

"Why, they are very pleasant and home-like. I can't quite make out the young girl. Oh, no; I don't feel a bit afraid. But I do hope to goodness they'll eat more than they did to-night, or I shan't feel that they get their money's worth!"

He did really laugh then. "Don't you worry

about that," he said. Then, as there was no further comment, he began, rather hesitatingly: "Aunt Hannah, since the scheme will pay, do you not think — it seems to me it would be a good plan to give Bessie a sort of weekly allowance — not exactly wages, but every one likes to have a little money to spend."

"To waste, in this case. No, I don't think it a good plan. Bessie hasn't a bit of sense about money, and I shall get her what she needs. She's dying for a silk gown, and I'd be ashamed to see her wear those dirty, tawdry things she has. I told her so. And I said if she did her best this summer I'd buy her one. She's awfully afraid these people will think she's a servant."

"But they —" he was going to say "must not," and then changed it to "will not, surely."

"As if it makes any difference! I'm your housekeeper, Roy Palmer, and I've always been respected. I didn't see as these people made any great to-do about coming to *my* table, and I gave 'em their choice. Bessie will have to earn her living, so it's no use for her to set up for grand folks. Don't *you* go to putting any nonsense in her head."

"Why, *I* have to earn my living. I dare say the young woman up-stairs thinks herself miles above me. No, I don't believe Bessie will cotton

to her. But now — like this: When girls go down town on Saturday night to hear the music and see each other, they like a bit of cream or candy — ”

“Jane Moore doesn’t spend her money for such stuff.” There was a touch of scorn in Aunt Hannah’s tone. “I don’t quite approve of this running down town!”

“It gives the young people a good deal of pleasure. I like it myself, and I am getting to be quite an old foggy. We all want a little joyousness in our lives. You’ll do better if you don’t keep her too strict.”

Was he really interested in Bessie? A less conscientious woman would have been delighted with this easy solution of Bessie’s destiny.

“Aunt Hannah,” he said suddenly, “Thirza Rolfe is home.”

CHAPTER III

THIRZA ROLFE

THIRZA ROLFE had been sitting opposite the Brooke party during the four hours' journey. She knew Miss Otis was one of those who toiled not nor spun. There were some distinguishing marks; the girl was quite aware of them now. Not merely in the term aristocratic, for there were two girls in her class who could have stepped upon a throne and been declared of royal lineage. It was another quite indescribable token. The elder ladies had a quaint old-fashionedness in their gray silks and the thread lace and violets on their bonnets, for the flood of violets had not yet come in.

She had *The Forum* in her hand, and now and then she quite lost herself in some article. She glanced up and caught Thirza watching her. For the merest instant she frowned. When, a long while after, Thirza ventured upon another glance, Miss Otis was studying her. Both flushed, and neither betrayed any sense of being offended.

They went on to the front of the car. Miss Rolfe waited a moment, then walked to the back

end, which she rarely did, on principle. So she did not see who took them away, but she knew they were boarders.

"Hello!" cried a burly, cheerful voice. "Sight o' you is good for sore eyes! I laid that the last minnit you'd go to Paris or some of them grand places, and Clara counted so on your comin' home. We bet," and he laughed heartily; "and, by the great guns, I've lost! How much traps have you?"

"A trunk, and a box among the freight. Here are the checks. There is my Noah's ark. Be sure to get the box. How are they all?"

"Well and hearty. They'll be glad enough, I kin tell you. I had to come down for some stuff."

She drew a long breath. There had been several changes in Westhorpe, she observed. Two or three people whom she used to know passed without recognizing her. Had she changed so much as that?

"Will you ride up in the business wagon?" asked her brother-in-law, eying her doubtfully.

"I'd like to walk. I want to see if I can find my way." She smiled pleasantly.

"Clara said mebbe she'd come down. But it's early, and there is a deal to do Sat'day afternoon. Well—here's my load;" throwing in some cases of goods. "But I could make room. Say, Thirzy, there's the stage."

If there was one thing she hated more than another it was being called Thirzy, and though she said nothing, she was quite as resentful as Bessie Deane had been. Certainly Mr. Kent had not altered for the better. He was stouter, redder, chipper, and louder. Not a point for romantic softening.

Some one spoke to her then. No, she had not been forgotten. And as she stopped to exchange a few words Palmer drove away with his load.

It was a pleasant walk. She went diagonally through the old park. She saw the wing recently built to the Methodist parsonage; the addition to the court house, some new dwellings; the Colston house on the corner, remodelled and made quite grand. There had been a good deal of new painting. Fences had been discarded in the modern fashion. Lawns were better kept. There was a wealth of roses everywhere. Oh, it *was* beautiful!

She turned down a street of old-fashioned houses with wide spaces of ground between, where at the back, the lots ran down to a little stream, the old creek, willow bordered. The ground widened out, and there were gardens and poultry houses and almost farm concomitants.

She paused before a gate, with her hand on the latch. A big boy ran down the path and stared, then bolted through. She walked up the path—

of course they would all be around in the kitchen. But she rang at the front door.

The instant it was opened there was a shriek. Clara, her mother, Aunt Abby more bent and wrinkled, and a host of children. It almost distracted her at the first moment. They pulled her hither and thither, they kissed her and exclaimed in almost every key; and at every other breath Clara said — "Well, I never!"

The dining-room was the general sitting-room as well. It was commodious, with a sort of square bow window built out that added greatly to the space. There had only been one baby born in the two years, but there were four children in the room, beside the big boy who had gone "down to the store."

Mrs. Rolfe went back to her seat in the window corner and took up her mending. A peach basket lined and frilled with turkey red seemed full to overflowing. Aunt Abby went out in the kitchen to dress the chickens that were to be cooked for Sunday dinner; Clara took up her baby and began to caress it.

"Well—you haven't changed a mite, has she, mother? You don't look a day over twenty. And when I was twenty-three, I had three babies. And do you see how fat I'm getting? I take after mother's folks. You're clear Rolfe."

Thirza Rolfe was a slim, tallish girl, with one of the willowy figures, and drooping shoulders; a clear, dusky sort of skin, fine and soft, and this, with her large, long eyes, gave her an oriental look. She was picturesque rather than beautiful. Clara had been the family beauty, with a much fairer skin and red cheeks, and curling, dark hair. Now, at nine and twenty, she was rather blowzy, commonplace; but Thirza would never be that.

"I wonder if I could go to my room? I feel as if I had the dust and grime of ages upon me."

"Oh, yes," answered her sister, briskly. "Bel has the little room next to mother's, and you can sleep there and use mother's room. I tell John we must build an addition; and he says wait until he can make a double house of it. But I'd begin to-morrow if Seth could lay up a little faster. They had an awful sight of sickness last winter, and lost their baby. Laura's ailing a good deal. Bel, go up-stairs with Aunt Thirza; maybe she's forgot the way," and Clara laughed.

"There are towels in my top bureau drawer," said her mother.

"We've gone up in the garret, Fan and me; and I think it's just splendid," began the child, a chubby girl nine or thereabouts, with a thick bang — indeed, half her short hair seemed brushed over

toward her forehead, which was broad but not very high, and made the bang unbecoming.

"You may go down, now," said Aunt Thirza, in a soft tone, and the child obeyed reluctantly. The room was in neat, old-fashioned order. The wall had been whitened until it began to scale off in patches. There was an antique, high-post bedstead, with a gorgeous patchwork quilt — a rising sun in reds and yellows and pinks and purples; a high bureau; a chest of drawers; a modern washstand; and some rush-bottomed chairs. The adjoining room had only a small bedstead and one chair. There would be room for her trunk.

She took off her jacket and skirt. How delightful the cool water felt! She held handfuls of it to her face. She brushed out her hair, which was not black, but a soft, dusky hue, and a trifle wavy, but it never curled like Clara's, and was unglossy, but fine and very long. If her trunk was only here! But she had a fresh waist in her satchel.

Thirza sat down by the open window. When she was nineteen she had almost a mind to marry. The old grand-aunt who named her died and left her five thousand dollars, and her father dropped down one day with an unsuspected heart trouble. Seth wanted the farm, so it was appraised. He also wanted to marry Laura Albert, and her money paid half of each girl's share.

Thirza felt herself but half educated, and she had a thirst for learning. She went away to school for a year and found out many things about herself, and why she was so different from Clara. Her mother thought it great foolishness. Then she resolved to study art and entered a training school. The second year she had spent her vacation abroad, and the world had opened its rich stores to her. She would never be a great genius, but she could earn money in a congenial manner and have a broad, satisfying life.

And it was so different from this! A vague shudder went over her. She had tried to idealize them all a little, to blame herself for lack of love, and so she had resolved to spend this summer among her friends and kinsfolk. From henceforth she was to lead her own separate life. Ah, how bright and peaceful and enticing it looked! The pretty suite of rooms, the three congenial women working out their own problem of self-support in a reliant manner, making a pretty, cosy, æsthetic home, where flowers and pictures and bits of rare china should be gathered; a touch of fire in the fireplace in the evening, the lounge rolled up, the easy chairs placed cosily, books and pamphlets, the papers of the day with their columns of woman's work, not simple woman's gossip over fashions; then a friend or two dropping in; or the three

going out to a lecture or a reception ; or somebody's "evening." What a delightful vision! This must give her courage for the weeks of tiresome commonplaces.

Some one was coming up-stairs, and behind the step there was a shuffling of feet and a banging of trunk corners.

"John's sent up your trunk," announced her mother. "And that great box. What is in it, Thirzy?"

Thirza sprang up, flushing.

"Let them bring the trunk in here, and the box —"

"You can't get that great box up here, 'er if you did it would have to stand in the middle of the floor in my room, and goodness knows how we'd get round."

"No, I'll unpack that down-stairs," Thirza kept her voice very soft and gentle. This was her mother, let her remember.

"Yes ; put the trunk here." An awkward boy and a thin, nervous-looking man had it by the handles. The boy grinned and said, "It's awful heavy," but he ran his words so together you had to interpret them by faith.

They put it down with a thump. Mrs. Rolfe explained that the "box didn't need no bringin' up."

"My, what a trunk!" ejaculated her mother.

Thirza began to unstrap and unpack, and shook out some skirts, hanging them in the closet.

"Are you through now?" asked her mother, who had been listening rather grudgingly to the rustle of silk. "Or is there some more schoolin'? 'Pears to me you ought to earn a lot to make up for all you've spent."

"I have been earning all this last year," replied Thirza, quietly, "not quite as much as I have spent," with a little smile. "But next year I shall probably earn more than I spend. I am through with the regular course, but no doubt I shall take lessons in some other branches."

"But if you know enough to get your living —"

"I shall study some things for the love of it."

Mrs. Rolfe sighed. Then she said: "Both your old lovers are waitin' for you — I expect; and, Thirza, Chris Morrow's bought Widow Perkins' farm. It went for a song. 'Twas a rainy day, and there wa'n't much biddin', so after all no one could blame him. He said he'd give twelve hundred for it and not a dollar more. Everybody knowed that, so they were afraid to step over the line for fear they'd get caught. And he's been fixin' up his house fine, I tell you. I ain't heered as he's waitin' on any one."

Thirza flushed. They had been very good

friends. She had almost thought she could marry him. That was at eighteen. Then they quarrelled about her going away to school. He told her she knew enough and she would be a fool to waste her money. Five thousand dollars made her seem a big prize, with perhaps two thousand from her father's estate.

"Here's one bureau drawer for you," said her mother, with a vague feeling she was making no headway. "I took the things out so's you'd have a little room. Clara does so want the house altered, but John can't spare the money out of the business, and Seth somehow don't get along. Laura ain't a real good manager."

Then they went down. The baby was asleep. There had been three children very close together, then a little halt before the other two came, Johnny and Frances Jane—the two others were boys again.

When Thirza went to bed she was quite convinced that Nature or the Lord had designed her for a single woman. She was sure she had no overpowering love for children. And yet when little Tom had pulled over the dish of potatoes standing on the kitchen table, the hard slaps his mother gave him went to her very heart. He was tired and hungry and sleepy, too. She took him up on her lap.

"Don't let that child go to sleep, Thirza," said Mrs. Kent, sharply. "I always give him a good wash on Saturday, and there was so much on hand I couldn't do it this afternoon."

"Couldn't I?" she ventured.

"No, supper's ready. There's John. He always comes home before the evening rush."

There was supper with no end of confusion. Aunt Abby and Grandma Rolfe cleared away the things. Clara washed the children and put them to bed, and at last the house was quiet.

It was quiet a long while Sunday morning. No one rose early. Ah, how the birds sang! And the clang of the old church bells brought back visions of her early girlhood.

No, there was nothing quite like the country, after all. The large ridge of hills in the varied greens of the early summer, with the softened, thinner effects, the vistas between the grim mountain walls, with here and there a scanty clump of bushes, all that could secure a foothold, the air like pearly gossamer, a sun yet devoid of scorching heat, and oh, the divine fragrance! There was so much of it. The wealth of beauty enfolded her.

There were friends and friends. Her girl mates had one or two children by the hand; and the young single women of that time seemed

rather old and worn, now. She was neither, they thought with a pang of envy. Her lavender gray gown fitted exquisitely. Thirza didn't have one high shoulder nor one high hip, nor just the indication of coming roundness in the shoulders. There was a touch of pink about the throat, and pink in her gray straw hat.

"Pink does make any one look young," said Miss Balcom to herself for future remembrance.

Aunt Hannah Gage pressed up and shook her hand warmly. "Miss Deane," she said, nodding to the girl beside her. How well and manly Royal Palmer looked! Why, there were quite a number of marriageable men in Westhorpe.

"Come out and see us," said Aunt Hannah, cordially. In her heart she thought—"She and that Miss Otis would just suit." But Miss Otis had gone to the little Episcopal chapel. They would take her up on the way. Westhorpe was Presbyterian to its heart's core.

"Aunt Hannah's taking some boarders this summer. I do wonder how she'll get along," and Clara Kent laughed.

"That young girl—"

"Oh, no! She's some of old Mr. Gage's second wife's folks. These people have been two or three years at Mrs. Garth's, but they wanted more quiet. Two rather oldish people and their niece. Rich, I

guess. Roy Palmer better look out for the niece. I don't see why the Westhorpe girls can't snap up the nice fellows."

Everybody was considering the possibility of marriage. It annoyed her. Clara's worldly gossip seemed to desecrate the grand Sunday.

She went to church again in the evening, and Chris Morrow walked home with her with a sort of jaunty indifference, as if to show her he was yet heart whole. And on Monday afternoon it seemed as if the town turned out to do her honor. They were curious about the kind of pictures she made, and if it was profitable business. Miss Balcom wondered how long it would take to learn.

The box contained gifts for the family, and, considering how different her life and aims were, she had made quite judicious selections. She brought Clara an etching of an old mill, because it was like the old mill where they used to play when they were children; just the same point of land jutted out in the water, and there was the same little swirl among the weeds and sedge grass.

"I should never think of putting that in a picture, when there are so many finer things. Queer, isn't it, how people run about painting them! There were several artists at the Holmes' last summer, and I do believe that they painted every square inch of the mountain. And old Jimmy's hut!

Why, they seemed to think that wonderful. I wish you'd paint me some flowers. You *do* paint?"

"Oh, yes." Thirza gave a faint little smile. And when they went to hang the picture, Clara finally consigned it to a corner. She and John had crayon portraits, and they had the places of honor in the parlor; then came a photograph of her parents, a group of the older children, and single ones of the two others. There were two panel pictures — pond lilies and hollyhocks. The wall was pretty full, to be sure. The room was stiff and ugly. The etching in its neat frame looked like a nun in a garnish crowd.

Her book was for her mother. It was a summer book of flowers and songs, little poems that sung themselves. One of the authors of the volume was a friend of hers, a bright, chatty newspaper woman who not infrequently broke out into song. Thirza had two little poems in it. She was not a real poet any more than she was an artist, but now and then an inspiration came to her. One of the illustrations she had given, and she had also designed the cover, which had not been paid for in regard, like the other, but in solid cash, after it had taken the second prize in her class, with two out of the five judges in favor of giving it the highest rank.

Mrs. Rolfe was proud of it, but in her secret

heart she wondered how people could be weak enough to pay away money for such things. Her idea of literary and artistic values were of the vaguest kind. She was gratified that Thirza could earn money so easily, but she had a fear that it was a gift akin to those of Cinderella's godmother, and would suddenly vanish. If Thirza was teaching school now, her first half-formed plan, Mrs. Rolfe could have understood that. She would have been still more proud of it.

But Westhorpe was not all of this calibre. Miss Brinsley, the judge's daughter, came over—she had gone to school with Thirza when they were a dozen or so years old—and was really glad to see her. Her honest eyes corroborated her words. She had painted a little, just for amusement; she had modelled in clay, and had an eager interest in the arts. They were all delighted that Thirza won one of the prizes. She hoped Thirza would go out sketching and take her for a companion. And would she come to tea on Wednesday afternoon, and meet a few friends?

Thirza was really glad to do so. She had a most enjoyable time, and other invitations were showered upon her. Clara laughingly declared she was capturing the "quality."

But lines were not so closely drawn in Westhorpe. The lawyers, the two doctors, the clergy,

and some of the higher bank officers formed a little coterie. They mingled with their neighbors and asked them to tea occasionally, or a reception to the minister, but they did not feel affronted when they were left out of some of the grander society "functions."

Mr. Rolfe belonged to an old family that had been known about Westhorpe for over a century. One of his sisters had married a judge, gone West and become a "governor's lady." Everybody in his time thought it a pity he shouldn't have looked higher than Delia Briggs, but she made him a good wife, though they never seemed to increase in worldly prosperity. But no one made any such comment when bright, showy, rather pronounced Clara married John Kent, who kept one of the grocery stores in the town. And it was a foregone conclusion that Thirza would take Chris Morrow, and then it was suspected that she cared for Bernard Ward. That a girl would deliberately choose a single life was simply incredible!

Now Chris meant to be early in the field. He was prospering and adding to his farm. And if Thirza wanted to keep at such fiddling work after she was married, he would not object. He had an idea she could sit down of an afternoon when the housework was done up and draw a little picture just as she would put on a patch or darn a stock-

ing. Only it would be a hundred times more profitable, and he knew she had not spent all her money.

Bernard Ward looked across the church at her that Sunday morning. He was singing in the choir, and he taught classics and higher branches at the academy. The small, spirited face had hardly changed, but it seemed to him the figure had taken on an indescribable dignity and grace. To think of her having made her mark, any mark in fact. A girl with courage and purpose! And he was here—just the same as four years ago. No, not quite. He had been learning all the time. But what was it all worth, if he spent his life here? And three years ago his dream was to marry Thirza and do just this.

CHAPTER IV

A NEW FRIEND

HELEN OTIS found, after a few days, that a whole summer on a farm would be rather dull. She must have a piano and some entertainment beside these mild drives. She was very fond of horseback riding.

"Neither of my horses are fit for a lady's riding," said Roy, "but I can get you one, and I'll inquire about the piano. I think we will have to go to Oxford for that. There's an organ factory; we might take it for our next drive."

"Thank you," she returned, pleased by his interest. His commonplace manner was very satisfactory.

Her harmonious elegance touched Royal Palmer in a curious way. Bessie had a kittenish gracefulness that had attracted him wonderfully at first. He was so little used to seeing any young women around, and it was very pleasant. Her cool, clear voice lingered in his mind long after she had spoken. It was a trained voice with a natural depth and sweetness. She had a gliding, fasci-

nating motion as she went about the house. He liked to see her come down-stairs. She never bustled or seemed to hurry, never ran against chairs or tables, never disarranged small belongings.

Roy Palmer had expected to be married some day. He was quite in demand whenever there were any festivities going on; but somehow either the right girl had not appeared or he was slow in deciding. Aunt Hannah made him very comfortable, and the girls in general were afraid of her sharp eyes. Then, too, he had been intensely interested in farming experiments, and secretly considered the possibility of a Western ranch. He was about a good deal with the men and took a warm interest in politics.

Roy drove the ladies over to Oxford and found that the Stents, a family in town, who were going abroad, would be very glad to rent their piano, as they had discussed the feasibility of storing it.

"But I shall only want it three months," explained Miss Otis.

"I will take it for the rest of the year," said Palmer. "Bessie plays and has been sighing for a piano. I shall enjoy it next winter."

They came across to the mountain road on the return journey. It had been used for cutting and burning timber, and there was the beginning of a quarry. It wound around the highest peak, then

descended in rather a tortuous course. Now it was used mostly for a show ride. Tourists and summer boarders enjoyed it, and picnic parties found delightful nooks. In one little opening a half-demented old fellow had built a stone hut, and lived here for years, leaving behind a rather picturesque spot.

A girl sat there in the shade, her wide-brimmed straw hat and a small straw satchel lying on a shelf of rock near by. She glanced up, then smiled.

"It's Thirza Rolfe," exclaimed Palmer. "Oh, Miss Otis, you will like to know her. I'll bring her in a moment," and he sprang out.

Thirza had recognized the companions of her journey to Westhorpe. She came rather reluctantly. She knew more about the fine gradations of society than Roy Palmer.

"Oh," said Miss Otis, "are you sketching? What an imaginative spot! Have you found any mountain fays? And I do believe you were on the train when we came up—a week ago Saturday."

"Yes," Thirza assented, pleased at the remembrance.

"Should you mind if we stopped a little while?"—to her aunt. "I have been quite anxious to scale this mountain peak, but I thought one would

have to climb by sheer force of will and physical strength."

"It is not so very hard. Like some other climbs in life, you ascend by degrees."

"But you are not all alone in this wild spot?" asked Miss Brooke, in amazement.

"There is nothing to fear," and Thirza smiled. "Unless a —" she was going to say a stray snake, when she bethought herself that she might alarm these city people, so she put "squirrel" in its place. "I used to come here, years ago; but I have been away. It has not changed at all;" to Roy Palmer.

"What a magnificent view!" Miss Otis glanced down — the town seemed to be in a little thread of valley. The river wound in and out with glints of silver, the villages around nestled lovingly amid the bits of woods that had not yet fallen a prey to mercenary hands, or the march of improvement. Afar off there was another mountain range, then long fields of waving grass and grain, and the blue green of the corn in contrast with the vivid yellow green of later planting. The sky was a marvelous blue. Yesterday's shower had made everything glisten with the richness of early summer.

The clumps of rhododendrons further down, like an army with their crowded bud spikes, shone with a metallic lustre.

"It is simply glorious," she continued, as no one made any comment. "Look at those undulating hills, and the meadows whose purple waves are blown about by the wind. And this great ledge of rock! Think of the storms it has withstood, of the suns that have risen and set over it, of the glory and beauty and terror it has witnessed. It dwarfs us into insignificance."

She stopped suddenly and flushed. She had a feeling that she had been needlessly enthusiastic; but she caught the gleam of Miss Rolfe's soft dark eyes, and the light in her face like an answering smile.

"I don't know why it should lead us to hold our lives in light esteem," Thirza answered gravely. "If it pleased God to make us of different material, to endow us with souls to appreciate even his grandest works, emotions of pain and pleasure and hope, ambition to grasp and penetrate the great mysteries about us, is not that a higher destiny than to exist for centuries as a rock, even a hundred years as a tree?"

"Yes, I think you are right. Yet I can never get over the feeling of awe at these mute witnesses that outlast us, that have seen civilization rise and perish as in Egypt. But I wonder if we are disturbing you?"

"Oh, no," said Thirza, with a frank smile. "I

shall have plenty of time during the summer. In fact, I think I was dreaming rather than working. The splash of the water had so many different notes. I should like to set it to music."

"Where is it? I hear the trickle."

"Just around the other side." Thirza looked at her, then at Palmer, and then at the grave lady still in the carriage. "There is a wilder view, beyond, if you are not afraid of a little scramble," with a faint laugh.

"Oh, no; auntie, will you mind —"

"I will stay with Miss Brooke," Palmer said. "Don't be too venturesome, Thirza."

"Oh, we won't go down."

Miss Otis followed her guide through a rather tangled way that was not really a path, as it would be later in the summer, when pleasure parties trampled over it. All the spring wildness clung about it, and the virginal sweetness, so different from the rich, deep, riper fragrances of summer. They passed a clump of firmly rooted scrubby cedars and hemlocks to a rounding sort of ledge, too rocky for much verdure. Through a fissure came a stream of water that wound here and there, making tiny waterfalls, then resting in a little basin that formed a pool and flowing over the rock below in a pretty cascade until it met the river that made a bend here.

"Don't go too far," cautioned Thirza, reaching out her hand as if to stay Miss Otis.

"What an enchanting picture!" Then she studied her companion. "I should think this would be much more striking for sketching," she said, with a touch of questioning wonder in her face. "You *were* sketching?"

"Not for gratification merely. I had a book of poems to illustrate, and there were two or three views I had been carrying in my mind. Perhaps I shall take another down under the cascade — there," pointing with a pencil she still held in her hand.

There was some well-bred curiosity in the face of Helen Otis.

"I am not rich enough to follow vagrant fancy, and perhaps have not the genius to score any brilliant success," explained Thirza Rolfe; "but I love my work, and, in this instance, pleasure and necessity go hand in hand."

"Still, you must be an artist?"

"We train artistic tendencies nowadays;" and Thirza smiled. "On the principle, I fancy, that nothing must be wasted. When I learned some three years ago that I had this talent, and that careers were open to women, at least enough of a career to enable a woman to earn her living and make a home for herself, I chose mine. The train-

ing gave me courage and an understanding of my own possibilities, and the home is in view, also."

She wanted to define her position at the outset. She settled, that day in the train, that these people were not among the toilers nor the spinners. She was too proud to be merely tolerated as a rather better specimen of country girl, to be taken up or dropped, as the other chose.

"A home — by yourself?" Miss Otis returned.

"Not exactly by myself." Thirza colored a little. "I am not as fond of 'private pensive life' as the old collier of Croyden. No, a woman's home. Three of us, all workers. We are off on vacations now, but September will call us home."

"Will you allow me to be interested?" Helen held out her hand cordially. "If I might ask without too much curiosity — if I might hope it would be in New York."

"It will be. I have been two years in an art school, learning to make the best of the talents I possess."

"I am so glad to meet you. I shall be in the city, though I was abroad all last year. And, now I should like to see a good deal of you. Do you know Miss Gage?"

"Oh, yes. We are old friends; and I have been coming over —"

"Do come soon. I was beginning to feel a little

lonely. Neither of my aunts are equal to tramps through 'field and fell,' and not knowing any one—oh, I hope you can devote a little time to me—or allow me to devote some to you. And I am so interested in your experiment. Are you going to call yourselves girl bachelors?"

Thirza laughed. "That is supposed to be a rather pretty sop thrown to single women. Still I do not see why women cannot be respected in remaining single as well as men. Not that I am going to disparage the wedded estate."

A little touch of something went over Helen's face as she thought of her father.

"Oh," she cried abruptly, "I am staying beyond reason, and some one is calling you."

"Roy—Mr. Palmer. You see we have known each other long enough to be familiar with Christian names; coming!" she called in a loud tone.

"Yes—auntie is worried, no doubt. But we must come here often—unless I should disturb you. I sketch a little as a school accomplishment, and most people do it abroad."

They turned and threaded their way back.

"You see they are safe, Miss Brooke;" and Royal Palmer smiled down at the girls.

"We did not go very far. We stopped and talked. What splendid views! I am sorry to leave them. I have not really seen anything."

"But we must go," said Miss Brooke, gently. "It is almost noon. And we ought to see those people —"

"The Stents? Yes. We will drive past there."

Palmer helped in Miss Otis. She was persuading Miss Rolfe to set a time for her visit.

"Come over to supper," said Palmer. "Aunt Hannah has been looking for you. I'll tell her."

"Well," acquiesced Thirza.

She had been hesitating on account of this very boarder, but she should be glad to meet her again.

She went back to her work. The ladies found the piano very satisfactory. "And we would be glad to have it in so safe a place," declared Mrs. Stent, with beaming approval. "It is a pity you don't play, Mr. Palmer."

Roy flushed at that, and unconsciously glanced at his hands. But Ward could come out and spend the long winter evenings with him, and it would please Bessie.

Thirza went back to her work. That made her late at dinner, and Clara was the soul of regularity.

"You needn't have minded. I am not very wild for hot dinners on a summer day. And when I do stay, don't try to keep anything boiling or baking, but just give me a cold bite."

"But the pudding is spoiled; that is never good cold."

“Never mind about it.”

“But we haven’t had one since you came home, and you used to be so fond of them. Perhaps it’s the thing not to care what you eat or how it is cooked. Good housekeeping is at a discount among you modern women. I declare, I shall pity your husbands, if you mean to have any.”

Thirza made no comment. Clara prided herself on being one of the best housekeepers in town.

She was very glad to start out to the Palmers’. It was a rather long walk, but a good part of it was shady. Her mother thought it a pity to put on her good silk to go trapesing through the dust. It was a pretty gray summer silk, sprinkled all over with purple violets, and the full fall of lace about the neck softened it to a quaint becomingness, and enhanced the refinement of her small, spirited face that suggested twilight.

Aunt Hannah was very glad to see her. She visited her for awhile, and heard about Bessie’s coming, in which there was no choice, and Aunt Hannah’s trouble to know what to do with her.

Bessie herself was up-stairs altering over her last summer’s white gowns. Then there was the neighborhood news, what the churches were doing, why she was over-persuaded to take in the Brookses, and how much she liked them. Afterward Aunt Hannah went out on the shady porch to present

her friend, as if she was proud of the responsibility. Roy came attired in his light summer suit and certainly looked well. Miss Esther was in the hammock with some pillows, looking very frail and delicate.

They didn't really have any visit, Helen felt, until in the evening, when Aunt Margaret went upstairs with Aunt Esther. Roy sat on the lower step listening to the talk that somehow stirred him a good deal. How ambitious Thirza Rolfe was! There was something in her independence that gave him a little pang. What did all these women mean to do who were hurrying into business and proud to earn their own living? And he knew some one who would worship the girl, who would never love any one else with that reverent tenderness, perhaps never love any one at all. What a delightful home these two people might make. He sighed a little. Homes were getting old-fashioned, women were thinking of so many outside things. How glibly these two girls talked them over! How much they knew about the world! The evolution of womankind, the full, noble intellectual existence, the great army of thinkers, of earnest workers—these were some of the sentences he caught. Thirza knew several women doctors, and they were doing such good work. These were the lives worth living.

At nine Thirza said she must go. She had hardly been home an hour to-day. To-morrow she was to go to her brother's to spend two days. After that they would see each other frequently. They would make a little studio up on Craig's rock, where nothing could interrupt them. "Oh, yes," Thirza said, "it would be quite safe. Tramps would not trouble to climb the rock."

Roy went out to harness the horse. Bessie stood by the back gate. She wiped her eyes with her handkerchief.

"What — Bess — crying?" He stopped and looked at her with sudden attention.

"Why can't I cry when I am so wretched? Oh, I wish I had never come here! If I had some money I should take a train to-morrow and never see this hateful Westhorpe again!" and now she sobbed.

"Bessie! Why, I thought you were getting to be very much at home with us all."

"I shouldn't be at home with Aunt Hannah if I lived here a hundred years! I just hate her! I didn't come here to be a servant!"

"Why, Bessie, you are not —" He paused abruptly.

"What am I then?" She raised her face, and he could see the tears by the light of the moon shining through a space between some trees.

"Yes — what else am I? And, yet, a servant has her wages to spend as she likes. I don't have a penny. I can't even ask a friend, or go out, without a fuss. You were kind to me when I first came, but now you hardly ever speak to me. And I've been considered as good as Miss Otis or any one else. I've never been put down in this fashion, as if I were some green emigrant girl glad of any kind of shelter. But I won't stay —"

"Bessie, Bessie, no one treats you like a servant."

"Does any one ever take me out? Would it have hurt any one if I had sat there on the front porch to-night? But Aunt Hannah wouldn't let me go. They didn't want me! I don't want her, but I have to endure her! She's so afraid Miss Otis will look at me or give me a civil word. It is not my fault that I am any relation to her!" and Bessie stamped her foot. "If I don't run away I shall go to the river some night and drown myself."

"Bessie — Bessie, what can I do for you?" He took both hands in his. They were small and soft, he had remarked that. Her lips and chin quivered with emotion, and she glanced up in his face piteously.

"Why couldn't you give me a little drive to-night when you take Miss Rolfe home, unless —" there was a subtle question in her whole face.

"Unless — what?"

"Well — unless you're sweet on her and want her to yourself. But, even then, I wouldn't mind. It's so lovely. And I've worked all day long. I'm tired and sick. Oh, I wish I was dead!"

"Miss Rolfe is only a friend. I am not sweet on her in the sense you mean," and he flushed. "You poor little child, I think you have been through a dull time of late. And if you like to go with me —"

"Like! Why, even a walk this lovely night would have been delightful. But I couldn't go alone. Oh, if you would take me!" Her face was alight with joy, then it gloomed over. "Aunt Hannah wouldn't let you," she added sorrowfully.

He laughed at that. "Yes," he returned, "I'll take you. You do deserve a bit of pleasure now and then. And, Bessie, you have a way of making the house — everything — so much prettier! Aunt Hannah has spoken of that."

"I didn't know that I could do anything she could approve of. But, Roy, I've always been as much of a lady as that Miss Otis. And if poor papa hadn't lost everything —"

"There, don't cry, child. You shall go." He was wiping her tears awkwardly. How like a rose-leaf her cheeks were. "And now I must harness up —"

"I'll run up-stairs. Call me down and say you are going to take me, because if you ask her to let me go, she won't. Oh, I have so wanted a little drive — any little pleasure!"

She had not had much in the way of pleasure, it was true. Aunt Hannah was rather sharp. It must be a great change for her. He would convince Aunt Hannah that she needed some recreation; all young things did. Of course, after the boarders were gone —

Roy drove around by the front porch. The girls were still talking, but Thirza was standing up with both hands on the railing. They had such a strong look, though they were not large. Thirza's face had a curious kind of resolution as well, not like a man's, but he smiled just there. Did all men have resolute faces?

"I thought I'd take Bessie with us, Thirza — do you mind?" he said, when a pause enabled him to speak. "There's hardly a chance for her to get out."

"Why, it would be very nice. Yes, certainly."

"Bessie!" he called up the stairway, "don't you want a little drive as Miss Rolfe goes home?"

"Oh, thank you a hundred times!" was the joyous reply. "Can I really go?"

Aunt Hannah came out in the hall.

"It's time she went to bed, Roy. She has to be up early in the morning. She had better not go."

But Bessie came flying down, her face alight with eagerness. Thirza was saying good-bye, and there really was no chance for further objections, since Miss Rolfe took it as a matter of course.

Thirza was really glad to see a little more of Bessie. The girl made the most of her past during the drive, and she did it very well, too.

Thirza felt the position here was rather anomalous. What an eager, childish little thing, and how pretty in the moonlight with her fluffy yellow hair, and shining eyes!

They said good-bye to Miss Rolfe. Bessie changed her seat and came over front. She nestled a little, not boldly, but in an entreating fashion. Royal Palmer would have been very much surprised if he could have known that Bessie had been standing by the fence for a full quarter of an hour, rehearsing this scene and what she must do to bring it about. She was a born actress. Last winter she had been in some little plays and rendered them excellently.

But Palmer was feeling rather grave about her. He admired these other women with their fine, strong personality. Some unknown depth in him had been touched, awakened.

"Bessie," he began, "can't you make yourself

content till autumn? When the folks have gone away—you see Aunt Hannah couldn't spare you now. And I'll do what I can to make it pleasanter."

"Oh, thank you," tremulously, her pretty hand stealing out.

He hurried up the pony. Aunt Hannah sat on the front porch waiting for them, and Bessie simply said "it was delightful," as she went straight along.

CHAPTER V

THE EVOLUTION OF WOMAN

WERE women born housekeepers, Thirza Rolfe wondered, and if they were not, would training make them nearer perfect in the art? For wasn't it a genius, after all? Clara was a housekeeper and nothing else. There was no breadth and outlook toward real homemaking; no lovely living, with time to enjoy friends; no freshness in the talks. She had no time to read. She didn't see how any one could serve two masters—her favorite condemnatory adage. When she had "real company," the house was stirred up a day or two beforehand; the children slapped frequently, when no severer punishment was meted out, to make them "keep out of things," which they never did. She was so engrossed with the meal that she had no time for her guests, and if she had some new cake or dessert and the visitors praised it, that stamped it as a success. The next day they went back to coarse common dishes that the children could not break, unbleached table-cloths that would not betray the tea and coffee stains, steel knives and

forks that made an immense deal of scouring for Aunt Abby, and the littered-up dining-room that always seemed hot and stuffy with so much bustling about and loud talking. It had been largely so in her mother's time, she remembered. It was always such a delight for her in her girlhood to go out to a few of the neighbors, where the daily living was a breath of divine order and pleasantness, where everything was in readiness for a friend, and you felt as if you made no extra trouble.

But if it was uncomfortable at Clara's, oh, what was it at the old home? Laura Albert was one of eight or nine children trained to work in a helter-skelter fashion, one waiting for another, or being in the other's way and doing half of a thing with some one to take up the other half. Seth had run the farm before his father died. It was the old homestead, and there had always been a Rolfe in it.

Seth's mother was capable and stirring. Seth's wife seemed to have begun life behindhand. The meals were always late. Yesterday's work lapped over in to-day's. It often rained on Laura's wash day, it was her luck, though now and then she changed her day. The ironing always hung around. Friday was considered sweeping day, but somehow the sweeping fell into fearful arrears. The house was merely brushed up. Half

her canned fruit spoiled, she seldom had any luck with cake, and the bread was heavy or sour, and the biscuit hard.

Laura's three thousand dollars had been used in re-furnishing with a modern parlor suite and rather garish Brussels carpet, in painting and repairing a little, and in partly paying off the shares. The place had been deeded to her in return. Her children — there were only two now — were often ailing. Their fall clothes were never ready when cold weather came, and the result was numerous illnesses. Then in early summer they sweltered and grew cross and nervous in winter gear.

The little girls were pale spindling things. Laura had not yet gotten over the loss of her boy, and cried when she talked of him. She was very fond of rehearsing her troubles and she magnified them, of course.

After the first day of it Thirza thought if she had never before believed in the higher training for women, she did now. To know the best method of attaining results, to save your time and strength and spirits and temper, was in itself a liberal education. The old idea that every woman was a born housekeeper, or if not born so, the magical ceremony of marriage transformed her, was a terrible mistake. And Thirza was het-

erodox enough to ask herself what right Laura Albert had to take a man's life and home in her keeping, with no thorough training for either. Seth, who had a little tendency to follow in his father's footsteps, without his father's intellectual enjoyments, had dropped down sadly. He had grown careless about himself. His clothes were often out of order, a rip here, a button missing, and he had accustomed himself to various makeshifts. He had begun to do the same with his farming implements, and to talk about luck.

"Some people do seem to have it all," he said to Thirza, as they sat out on the porch after supper. She had dried the dishes for her sister-in-law a good half-hour before, but Laura was still "puttering." Hazel, the youngest girl, was asleep on the old lounge, and Edith had snuggled up to her aunt, whose arm was over her thin shoulder, and whose warm hand clasped both of her little bird's claws. "Now, there's Palmer, he set out a quince plantation and last year made five hundred dollars clean money. His ground was rather low and not good for much, and everybody said he was a fool; but to scoop in five hundred! And some of those fellows over there are working for a new railroad."

Rolfe sighed.

"Father had some splendid quinces, as I remember," said Thirza.

"Well, they grew old and knotty ; they don't do anything now. And to sell well you must have first-class things. People have grown so mighty particular !" in a resentful tone.

"We are trying all the time to raise the standard in everything. If you want to make money you must offer the best of whatever you are doing. You must do your best," said Thirza, spiritedly.

"Hard on us fellows who are cramped for money. Now, last winter I lost my best cow, and Dolly, the mare, run something in her foot and was lame for weeks. Then there was the sickness — and the boy — " Seth made a long pause. "Laura'll never get over it."

Thirza wondered how it would be if everybody gave up to their sorrow ! Had one no duty to the living when the duty to the dead was ended ?

"I want to fix up and get some new stock. But I haven't had a dollar to spare, and Clara is worrying about her money. They want to have the house altered."

"Still, she won't push you."

"She'd have to sell the farm if she did," and he gave a harsh sound like a bitter laugh.

"Oh, she won't do that."

"I wish to heaven I could raise a thousand

dollars somewhere and pay her and have some money to start on."

There was a long silence. She had heard from Clara that matters were going badly with him.

"I suppose now, Thirza, you haven't any money to put out?" he asked tentatively.

She had felt this would surely come, though she had not expected it so soon.

"I really haven't it;" softening her voice that the refusal would pain as little as possible.

"But you haven't spent all yours?"

His tone was one of surprise and almost upbraiding.

"Not all my legacy, if you mean that. I had an opportunity about a year ago of an excellent investment, but for five years I cannot touch it except to sell out at a sacrifice. I kept a little in case of illness, or if I didn't do as well as I hoped."

"But you took a prize!" rather resentfully.

"Yes, and I earned part of my living. This incoming year I expect to earn it all. But I want to save something for old age;" and she gave a soft little laugh.

"And there is no need at all! Thirza, I think you are a very foolish woman. Clara thinks so, too, though she may not have the spunk to tell you. There's Chris Morrow just ready to go down

on his knees to you. And he's getting mighty forehanded, too! If I had him for a brother-in-law I shouldn't have to go round begging for a little money. He'd be good enough to a fellow. But maybe you will be, Thirza. He's cared for you so long. And there's no question but he could marry first-rate."

Thirza's face was scarlet in the soft dusk. Clara was using her best efforts for this end. Had Chris dared to suggest to Seth —

"That's just it," began Seth crossly, breaking a rather embarrassing silence. "Women are beginning to hold themselves above marrying. They want to rush to the great cities and do something to earn their living, and take up with an attic room when they might have a home and everything they could possibly need. What have you against Chris Morrow?"

"Nothing, as a citizen of Westhorpe. Nothing, even as some other woman's husband. I will also admit that in my teens he possessed certain attractions for me; but as I grew older and began to realize my own wants and tastes and aims, I found they were not his."

"It was that foolish going away to school —"

"If I had not wanted to go to school, if I had felt quite satisfied with the life about me then," she interrupted, with some spirit, "I might have

yielded. He thought it an awful waste of money. He would have tied up my little legacy — taken possession of it, perhaps — and, since it was mine, I preferred to spend it as I chose. And my aim is to some day restore what I have spent, out of my own earnings. No, Seth; I have decided my own life; and surely I have a right, since I make it no expense to any other human being.”

“And you mean to be an old maid!”

Seth Rolfe thought he had said the hardest and most mortifying thing he could to his sister.

“I shall remain single until it suits me to marry,” she returned, with quiet dignity. “There are some qualities in Chris that I should hate to have in a husband. We really have no aims in common. He means to accumulate money; he cares next to nothing for real education and the refinements of life. He can marry women who would suit him a hundred times better than I.”

“But he’s such a good fellow; I don’t see why you can’t like him.”

“I must have a regard higher and stronger than mere liking for the man I marry —”

“Edith!” cried Laura, impatiently, “just come in and go to bed. Thirza, how could you keep her out here in the damp? I declare! if I don’t look after every single thing, nothing is done. Seth, why didn’t you send the children to

bed? You knew it was bread night, and I'd be busy."

"I would have put them to bed," said Thirza, gently rousing the child, who had been sleeping in the warm shelter of her arm and shoulder, and protected from all dampness. "Edith," softly.

"I want to stay with you," whimpered the child.

Her mother took her by the shoulder urgently. "I'll put them to bed," she said, with a half-angry decision.

"I wish you had thought, Seth," began Thirza, gently; "it would have saved Laura, and she is tired."

"Why, the children go to bed when they like. Half the time they're lying around asleep!" he retorted impatiently.

There was another long silence. The sound of the mother scolding fretfully up-stairs jarred on the lovely summer night. Would she take Clara's life? Would she take Laura's life? No! a thousand times no! Why were married people always so anxious to ensnare their single friends, when matrimony was not very satisfactory to them?

"Well" — and Seth rose in a sort of shambling manner, the droop of his shoulders something like that of old age — "well, I suppose I must weather

through, somehow; but it's making bricks without straw, and then people wonder they don't hold together. Great Scott! I wish some one had left me a few thousand dollars! You may bet your life I wouldn't be galloping off to college; I'd have more sense!"

Thirza rose, too. They hardly looked as if they belonged to the same family, standing there; yet, five or six years ago, everybody had been predicting great things of Seth Rolfe, because he had married three thousand dollars; and before that he had been one of the beaux of Westhorpe.

Thirza's soul was filled with infinite pity. But she could not help wondering why Seth could not have had as much push and courage as herself. Surely he had quite as good a chance.

Clara had said: "Now, don't let Seth bamboozle any money out of you." Clara was generally more forcible than elegant. "He has been trying to borrow money, John heard, and when a man in his situation begins that, he's on the road down hill. Let him take hold and work. He's fallen into such a way of dawdling round."

But she had told him the simple truth about her precious hoard. By the time she was fifty she would be placed above both want and the need of toiling. Still she longed to comfort him. She had a vague plan in her mind, but she was waiting

until the last of her stay to mention it. His downcast and discouraged air smote her heart.

"Seth, I am sorry," and she laid her hand on his arm. "I don't see how I could give you any immediate help. But I had thought of something — there is my five hundred dollars in the place, you know. I had about decided to make it over to the children. You will feel that the use of it is yours, and you need not be anxious about paying interest. You could save it up for them. You will only need to think of Clara's part then, and mother's little income."

He had paid her no interest the last two years. He really thought if she had money to waste going to Europe and such things, she did not need it.

"You're very good;" with a long sigh. "It doesn't give me any ready money, though. I'm so hampered. I can't carry out any of my plans. You can't farm nowadays without money."

She felt almost as if he had pushed her rudely away. She thought it would be a relief to have that debt off his mind, and he took it with apparent indifference. It had not been on his mind very much this last year or two. Even Laura had said: "If she's making money so easily she might give us that. Anyway, I shouldn't hurry to pay off her share."

Then he turned and went into the house, found his pipe and lighted it. Laura came down "dead tired," she said. "She'd been on the go all day. She sometimes envied the women who had nothing to do but just some fiddling little thing, who could sit round and had no house to keep and no children to look after; who could stay dressed up and never so much as soil their hands."

Laura rocked violently to and fro. Thirza was trying to count up her labors. A very simple dinner; a dessert of canned fruit, nearly all the afternoon spent in bewailing her dead baby. Thirza had helped pick the strawberries and laid the table. The biscuits had been hard and tough. Then there had been dish-washing and the kneading of bread for to-morrow's baking. There certainly was no effort of mind, no real energy in it. Thirza felt that she would hardly call it work.

On the whole she was rather glad to have her two days' visit end, though Laura insisted she should come for a fortnight, and wondered how she could bear to live in one room, in a crowded city like New York, full of everything, dirty and hot, and away from all her folks. "And you might just as well marry and settle down here among us all. I couldn't bear to be off there alone!"

"Oh, I have made some very nice friends. I seldom feel lonesome," rejoined Thirza.

"Well, if I couldn't go over to Oxford and see mother and the girls every week or-so, I should just die. And if I didn't have a husband and children I should be awfully wretched. But I wasn't cut out for an old maid."

How truly was she fulfilling her destiny as a wife and mother!

Then Thirza went out to the Palmers'—the place was invariably spoken of as if it contained several members of the family. She had always been good friends with Roy, comrades, indeed, and just now she was greatly interested in him. He had some breadth. He was not educated, in the broader sense; indeed he had never been away from Westhorpe. Perhaps it was his intimacy with Bernard Ward that had kept him up in certain lines. Yet Ward was such a passionate scholar. Palmer mixed a good deal with the public men of the place. He was coming to have decided views on politics, on the improvement of the town, on the standing of the state, and the welfare of the country in general.

"Do you know," declared Ward one evening at the close of a talk, or rather of the evening, for they were like girls, never talked out,— "do you know that you ought to go to work and study law?

You have such a strong, I was going to say judicial mind, but that doesn't quite express it. You are so broad, and fair."

"And add to the list of those who have to fight for a pittance! No, I shouldn't like the continual struggle to get higher up. I like my own independent life, and my father's home is dear to me. But I *do* sometimes wish Westhorpe could broaden out. I am in heart and soul for the new railroad, because it will connect us with business centres. You see it's so far over to the south that it won't disturb the pretty part of the town."

"Yet you talk to me about wasting my life here," rejoined Ward, reproachfully.

"I do feel that, with your attainments, you ought to be a professor somewhere. Yet I should be awfully sorry to have you go out of my reach. I shall miss you the month you are away. Come down — let me see — come down to supper to-night."

"But you have a lot of boarders."

"Two really delightful elderly ladies and a sensible young one, who is so high up in the social scale you do not feel any embarrassment about it. Oh, yes, come over and have a sing. Miss Otis is a beautiful performer, a fine one, too, I suppose, but the tenderness moves me. She has hired a piano, and we have all turned musical. I'll tell Aunt Hannah, and she'll be glad enough to see you."

"Well," assented Ward, rather reluctantly, won by the promise of a musical evening.

And when he strolled out at five or so, Thirza Rolfe was sitting on the shady step reading; some one was in the hammock, and it seemed at first as if there might be a group of half a dozen ladies seated in rocking-chairs. He was fain to retreat, but Thirza glanced up with a smile, and Aunt Hannah came around with a lovely china plate with some luscious raspberries piled upon it, in their dull, frosty red.

"Roy's over in the meadow," she said. "He's had some men mowing, the grass was so heavy. He will be up in ten or fifteen minutes. You're a great stranger, and I'm uncommon glad to see you."

Then she introduced him to the party and begged him to be seated, and told him he must excuse her or they wouldn't have any supper.

He stood, hat in hand, rather uncertain.

"I might go down to the meadow and hurry up Roy —"

"You'll do no such thing. You have had walk enough. And you and Miss Rolfe are old friends."

He sat down on the step, opposite Thirza. Miss Otis made a graceful movement, possible to only a few of the hammock-elect, and came up to a sitting posture.

"But I interrupt your reading," he said.

"That will not matter."

"The latest novel?" with an odd smile.

She held up the book with a gleam of triumph.

"Ruskin! Surely you are not a very advanced woman. Still—I am going to insist that you finish your chapter."

"I will assent to that, since I am so nearly through."

Thirza had a cool, clear voice and read with no straining after elocutionary effects. The style seemed especially suited to the subject and the waning summer afternoon; the distant sun was around on the other side of the house but stretched out in long reaches over the fields, while the vines swayed slowly to and fro, making delicate tracery shadows.

Bernard Ward carried his profession in every line and feature. If he had been working in a factory he would still have looked the scholar. His high, fair forehead, his light hair that often had a tumbled look—it made a slight effort toward being wavy; his eyes that seemed always looking at some vague distance, eyes of gray blue, with a sort of limpidness seen often in those of women. The nose was straight and rather small, the chin a trifle too narrow, though a little flesh might round it out. His mustache, with long

ends, was light brown also, with no golden tints. A good but not a striking face, except in its intellectuality; rather poetic, indeed, yet kept to the level of ordinary life by the ordinary duties. And his eyes had been trained to see a great deal without betraying their far search.

He had only seen Thirza Rolfe in church. Three years ago she had gone out of his life just as she was beginning to grow into it. And he never was quite certain whether he blamed or approved the counsel he had given her, the encouragement to try her powers. He would have been very glad to have taken her further education in hand, but he felt she should be more free to go entirely away, since her mother and Clara disapproved so energetically. He had dreamed a young man's dream about her; he dreamed it over again, now, listening to her voice; but it was the same young man's dream.

There had come to her an indescribable change; the change that was the outgrowth of the great question of the age as to how much right a woman had to herself. She had taken the sole right. It was in her voice—she was reading what Ruskin said with his forceful, earnest style, but not for any winsome effect upon her listeners. Her delicate brows seemed straighter, the nose and chin and lips had a certain resolution, an

independence. She was not thinking about being pretty, though she was very fair to look upon. She had taken up the world resolutely. It showed in the way she held her shoulders; he thought, too, it showed in the nervous, flexible hands.

The young man's dream would go for nothing. She had not so much outgrown him as that she had grown on different lines. She would need no man's help to shape her life. She would not accept the usual lot simply because she was a woman and a man loved her.

How could he read all this, knowing so little of women outside of Westhorpe? Yet how could he fail to read it when it was in every paper, in the novels of the day, when magazinists devoted their pens to it in light and heavy articles, in satire, in counsel, and the rampant ones in approval.

A strange voice awoke him out of his reverie. A trained voice, with the subtle inflections of society.

"I never really understood Ruskin before," said Miss Otis. "I think I have considered him rather an obstructionist, a man who opposed railroads and all kinds of modern progress, and who was fain to take us back a few centuries to get at real simplicity, real truth, real living. And it always seemed to me the living of to-day was just as real

as that of our grandmothers. They followed the fashion of their times. Confess, Aunt Margaret, that in your youth you knew some old ladies who bored you with their endless trifles; who were particular about the width of their gown, and they were frightfully narrow; who curled and powdered their hair, and really, if history is true, led very artificial lives."

Miss Brooke, thus adjured, smiled with the softness of coming age that had not altogether narrowed her.

"I don't at all agree with Ruskin if he disapproves of modern conveniences of travelling," she said. "I can hardly think he meant it that way. And a great deal of country simplicity is the sheerest ignorance and prejudice, obstinacy and self-conceit. I think the world *has* advanced. My dear, I went about in thin prunella gaiters in bitter winter weather when I was a young woman. I am not prepared to indorse all the new movements, and if women are to take the place of men in the avenues of work, what are the young men to do but to become drones? It seems a man's place to work for a woman."

"There will always be plenty of women glad enough to have men work for them, my dear Miss Brooke," said Thirza, smilingly. "There are only a few who have the courage or the desire to go out

and make homes for themselves. And with many of these it is compulsion, or the effort to avoid a distasteful life."

"But some of the best and noblest do go out," declared Bernard Ward, with a certain moodiness.

"Will you walk in to supper?" asked Bessie Deane, in a soft, winsome voice. She wore a white gown, a fine striped muslin, that Aunt Hannah had laid away for curtains years ago. Bessie had seen its capabilities at once. Jane Moore had made the bodice, and its plain aspect was a great relief to Bessie's usual furbelows. She looked very pretty indeed.

Palmer had come up from the field and made himself presentable. The dignity of a host sat naturally upon him, and Miss Otis said to herself, "He ought to be in some larger sphere."

CHAPTER VI

TWO ASPECTS OF LOVE

THEY had a delightful evening talking and singing. Aunt Hannah sat on the porch just beyond the window. She was glad to take her turn out of doors when the day's work was done. Bessie made herself very agreeable. Miss Otis found that she had quite a clever soprano voice. It was not deep or emotional, but quick to vary where feeling was needed. But she was best in the light, airy pieces, where mirth and mischief met. Miss Otis had a soprano voice as well. Grave songs suited it the best. In some songs it was infinitely tender. Thirza sang very little and was useful to make up in alto parts.

It was curious how Bessie warmed and blossomed. There was some subtle power in her. She was very, very happy because she saw she had been a success. She had changed her tactics a little. Aunt Hannah was like a wall of stone, and she might throw herself at it all day long; but she could get round it. She could find little unprotected places here and there, and working in her dainty foot could climb up a step or two.

"After all," Aunt Hannah said to herself, "ten weeks isn't a very long while. Bessie *is* of a good deal of service in the fancy parts. I suppose I *am* old and plain, and it's hard getting out of ways that suit you, so long as they don't interfere with others. The Brookes seem to like her, so I needn't worry. When they're gone we'll settle upon what she is to do."

Indeed, Bessie became invaluable to Miss Esther. She was much more feeble than the preceding summer and could only take short drives. When the other two ladies went out Bessie stayed with the invalid and was really entertaining.

Thirza and Helen were surprised into one of the congenial friendships people occasionally form when they have hardly considered such an event possible. Thirza would not have dreamed of it if she had been living in the old farm-house, with her vague desires and aspirations. Miss Otis would not have attracted her because she was quite outside of any life she was likely to have. And though they were on a different plane now, they met on the broad highway of advancing womanhood. Society no longer flouted the woman who earned her own living, if she was attractive and intelligent. She might not be asked to grand "functions" for which she had neither gowns, jewels, nor inclination, but there were other op-

portunities of cordial social recognition. Miss Rolfe had learned this. So she did not deem it necessary, after she had stated her own position, to stand back in a repellent attitude until Miss Otis had battered down the fences to show that she was really in earnest.

Through Thirza, oddly enough, she came to know some of the best people in Westhorpe. Miss Brinsley was delighted with her, and the Brinsley house was one of those charming homes where culture and intelligence found ready admission. The judge was a fine old-school gentleman, very fond of his birthplace, proud of it as well, and always came thither for the summer.

Helen Otis had enjoyed her girl friendships with the enthusiasm of youth, but her year abroad and infrequent letters had extinguished most of them. There was also the feeling she had outgrown those rather romantic ideas and dreams. Her passionate love for her father had sufficed, and her new ideal was to be his friend and house-keeper and idol. Even now she could not understand why he should want any one beside herself. He would have been quite sufficient for her, she thought.

So when Thirza Rolfe came into this dreary, disappointed loneliness, she was doubly welcomed. Her few years of seniority, her strength and de-

cision, her courage in making a path for herself, attracted the young girl strongly. They were very congenial. They spent whole mornings wandering about Craig's Hill, finding picturesque nooks, and talking over the ever-fascinating subject of the Coming Woman, her purposes and aims and her part in the regeneration of the world.

They took long drives together. Thirza knew every road for miles around, every picturesque spot, and they were the finer to Miss Otis for looking through Thirza's artistic eyes. Then there were delightful evenings at the Palmer house. Thirza could have had nothing like it at her sister's, though Clara was quite jealous, and one day openly accused her of hanging 'round after Roy Palmer.

"You know better," Thirza retorted indignantly.

"I'm not the only one that thinks so!" and Clara tossed her head. "You business women may run around with men and after them in the cities, but we're not so advanced as all that. Last Sunday night Chris asked me if you were engaged!"

Thirza's face was scarlet.

"You may tell him that Royal Palmer has not even asked me to marry him, nor made love to me in the slightest degree," she returned indignantly.

"Well — I am very glad to hear it. John said

he should be awful sorry. They don't like Roy going in so for the new railroad—none of the men do. Westhorpe is good enough as it is."

"You are mistaken, Clara. They were discussing it the other evening at Judge Brinsley's. He is in favor of it," said Thirza eagerly, glad of this tack in the breeze of talk.

"Oh, yes, some of the moneyed men, who come here a little while in the summer! We who live here all the year round don't want a lot of factories, and mill hands, and saloons, and heaven only knows what all! John heard that Palmer had offered a right of way through that old marsh of his, on condition they would do some filling in. But when they come to vote on it, he will see he can't have everything his own way."

"I think it the best thing that could happen to Westhorpe. Such a pretty town as this is, to be dependent on that little spur of road for a connection with the outside world! It was well enough perhaps twenty years ago, but there is so much more travel now. And I am sure the farmers are always grumbling about freight charges."

"As if they would be any cheaper!" Clara threw up her chin with the disdain of superior knowledge. And then she delivered a long harangue upon what John said.

Thirza looked at her in a sort of wonder. John

Kent made no pretensions to even ordinary education. It was a favorite boast of his that at ten years of age he had to "turn out into the world." His father had died when he was still younger. He had been a farmer's boy, then a grocery clerk, and so worked his way up. He was pleasant, obliging, thrifty, and a man of his word, and he was esteemed at his true value. Did Clara think him so superior? When his predictions came out right she was always rehearsing them, but she never referred to those that missed.

A ridiculous idea flashed through Thirza's mind. If she had become Mrs. Morrow four years ago, would she have this overwhelming opinion of her husband? He had talked a little that evening at Judge Brinsley's, and she had been ashamed of the boorish manner and ungrammatical modes of speech in such a house as that. True, he was in some way answering Palmer. Was he really jealous? She smiled to herself. She had always been the best of friends with Roy. She had liked his mother and Aunt Hannah, and the old house with its country flower garden always held a charm for her. But she doubted if Roy ever had a thought of falling in love with her.

Was it habit merely that made most women indorse their husbands so energetically? Or was it from that strained endeavor of loyalty, an exalted

feeling of duty, and a secret mortification lest the world should see the feet of clay on which their idol supported himself? She had always felt she must be really proud of her husband. It was one of the articles of faith with the new woman that she did not look at man through the eyes of the trained devotee, that she could weigh and measure according to an impartial standard, that she judged according to the real values and not the glamour of a passing fancy. The judge and Mrs. Brinsley were her ideal couple, really lovers yet, and she had heard Mrs. Brinsley condemn some of her husband's foibles. And Louise Brinsley, just her age, was single still, with all the splendid opportunities she must have had of choosing!

All this time Thirza had evaded Chris Morrow in every manner. She would not even walk home with him from church. Perhaps one reason she was so fond of being out to "Palmer's" was because he never came there. Not that the men were bad friends, but neither had they ever been in any degree special friends. She had been somewhat amazed at Morrow's onslaught that evening. Had it a deeper animus?

"If everybody would not put marriage at you as the one great thing!" she said indignantly when she had gone up to her mother's room to finish a bit of sketching in peace. "When railroads run

in every direction and people go to and fro continually it may even dawn on country towns, as it has in the larger cities, that a single life is respectable. But I suppose it is only getting over the years when men may possibly fall in love with you. I am sure if Aunt Hannah was a widow ten times over," and Thirza had to laugh at the ridiculous conceit, "she couldn't be more respected. And she might have some stupid maudlin lout on her hands! I am glad marriage isn't going to be the first thing with the new woman."

She wondered, presently, if she might not as well let Chris "ask and be done with it." Then she would not have to keep dodging everywhere. She felt rather mortified that a man of this stamp should love her, should have remembered her so long. Perhaps it was not all actual regard. She would have felt much easier in her mind if she had known that two women whom Chris would have married had promptly declined his attention. They were not Westhorpe women, however. He had some good sense on the marriage question, and he knew about what he wanted.

The opportunity came sooner than Thirza really desired. There was an afternoon picnic to the Cascade, where the little stream tumbled over the rocks and went on its way to join the river. It was a sort of family and church affair. The

Sunday-school was always taken off to some distant place. But here the children played about while the mothers rested and gossiped. The young people strolled around or went out in boats as the river grew shady. There was some music also. A stone fireplace was built, tea and coffee made, and it really was quite a treat to most of them, if it did tire them as well.

"Of course you'll go, Thirza. Mother would feel dreadfully disappointed if you didn't. And then you don't come but once in two or three years."

That was the point to most of Mrs. Kent's arrows, and she did not scruple to use it.

"Yes," answered Thirza, bravely.

She went over and brought Edith Rolfe. There was nothing for her to wear, as usual, her best white frock being too much soiled. But Thirza brought it along and hired a woman to launder it, the day being a good drying day. Then she sewed some lace about the neck and trimmed the forlorn child with pale pink ribbons, and really, she wasn't so bad. Her eyes shone with delight. She laughed and ran about with the other children, but every little while she flew back and caught her aunt's hand, pressing it with a strange fervor, and just saying in a voice that sounded almost like a sob — "Oh, Auntie Thirza!"

It touched Thirza Rolfe immeasurably. Why

did not the mother love her? Wasn't there a good deal of romancing about mother love as well?

Clara had said one day — "Oh, yes, Laura takes on dreadfully, but if she'd been more careful I do think the baby would have been alive to-day. She doesn't know how to take care of children — well, not as much as a cat, for a cat does look after her kittens. They have the most dreadful colds all winter long."

And when Thirza saw the soft pink in Edith's thin cheeks, and noted her possibilities, she almost wanted to fold her in her own mother pity and love.

She was thinking of this — wondering if, in a few years, she would not be rich enough to play at motherhood. She had been watching a group of children playing — she hoped some day to do some designing in this line. Then she turned to go back. There was a short cut by the rocks, where they seemed to have been riven apart by some old upheaval of nature's forces, and as some one grasped her arm she uttered a sudden alarmed cry.

"It's only me, Thirza." Morrow seemed to take her all in his arms in the narrow place. She could not have fled, even if she pulled away. So she stood up straight, severe.

"Will you let me pass?" Her voice was calm

and cold, with a great effort, for she was raging at heart.

"No, I won't. There, now! You've got to listen to something I want to say;" in a determined tone.

"Very well. Say it."

He flushed angrily.

"If you hadn't known that I loved you, you wouldn't have been always on the fly! You wouldn't give me a decent chance to say it. But I want you to marry me. Thirzy, I loved you long ago. I've always loved you. I've got a nice house to put you in, and I'll give you anything you want in reason. Will you marry me?"

His strong stout figure almost filled the space. He was very well looking, as an animal might be. There was nothing repulsive in his face save the lack of intelligence that education and culture gives. He was sharp and shrewd. He knew enough to make money, and he was quite certain money was the great all.

"I wanted to save you the pain of a refusal, and that was why I avoided you. I do not wish to marry you, or any one at present."

"Made up your mind to be an old maid?" he asked sneeringly.

"I may live to be old—I find life very pleasant. I may remain single—"

"Till the fellow you want asks you," he interrupted, an angry light in his eyes.

"That would be largely in his favor, if I wanted him. I do not know of any reason why the woman should not be satisfied in her election as well as the man. I do not believe even you, Mr. Morrow, would care to marry a woman who had no sort of preference for you, not the faintest thought of love," and she shuddered.

"But you could if you tried. Thirzy, I'll be good to you every day and hour. You could go on with your pictures. If you wanted a servant, you should have one —"

To be called Thirzy all her life!

"I don't see why you can't. I've suspicioned Palmer."

"Roy Palmer and I have been friends and shall so remain. He has nothing whatever to do with it. No one has. I simply do not love you, cannot marry you. That is all. Now let me go and do not trouble me any more."

She looked steadily at him without any outward tremor, at least; if she shrank from a sense of repugnance she could not overcome, she did not betray it. She looked steadily at him, waiting for him to turn in the narrow path. She would not entreat or argue, but win by her woman's right to respect.

He meant to make her do both. He had a stubborn sort of belief that if he talked long enough he could convince her. He had all her family on his side. He and John Kent were the best of friends, for they were both prospering in the same material fashion. They both had the same aim—to make money. Clara was a sensible, happy, satisfied woman, and she had held out both hands of welcome to Chris. And he was amazed, somehow, that he could not make any headway, now that he had her here, a virtual prisoner.

There was a fine, high quality in her womanhood that he had not counted on, that he knew nothing about. He could understand anger and the commoner phases of disdain. He had even meant to make use of a pretended sympathy with her brother in his stress of misfortunes. Indeed he would have lent him a few hundreds readily enough to win Thirza's good-will and promise, but he did not mean to throw his money away.

Thirza stood waiting with no show of impatience in her face. He turned a swarthy sort of red, his eyes wavered beneath her clear glance, he almost hated her in the sense of defeat and mortification that swept over him. He was not good enough for her! What were the Rolfes that she should look so high? But he felt powerless.

All his arguments shrank to spiritless ghosts and would not be marshalled in battle array. He did not understand; his whole big body was in a protest. He could no more bend her to his will than if she were a statue. He did move a little aside, and she passed on, slight, slim, her proudly poised head, her small spirited face, full of unconquerable dignity.

He ground his heel in the gravelly earth; he doubled up his fist, as if he could strike some one a mortal blow. Certain ugly, sulky lines settled in his face. Good heavens! To really have her in his power where she must coax and entreat, and he had the prerogative of refusal!

"You're a fool, Chris Morrow!" he said between his closed teeth. "I ought to have made sure of her right away, as soon as that money came. Gad! I wasn't sure even that I really wanted her. And when she put me off about going to school—we ought to have set in—the lot of us and not let her fool her money away and get filled up with these new-fangled ideas about women's rights. The right to have a husband is the best right they'll ever get! And though they put on airs and hold their heads so high, most of 'em jump at the chance. When they begin to get on the list they are not so high and mighty."

Thirza threaded her way rapidly through the

narrow defile with a half fear that Morrow would follow her. When she came out to the open space a light wagon stood there and Roy Palmer was helping out Miss Deane. She looked extremely pretty in her white gown and baby blue ribbons that she had adroitly coaxed out of Palmer, and begged him not to admit the fact to Aunt Hannah. And it was through his intervention that she had come to the picnic; Aunt Hannah had declared the walk too long for the hot day.

"See here," he said, as she stood there pleading so piteously with Aunt Hannah, it seemed to him, "see here, I have to drive over to Knowlton to meet some parties about the new road. I shall not be back until dusk, just about as they are breaking up. I can take her over and bring her back. She doesn't get much chance at pleasure. I only wish you could go yourself, Aunt Hannah—it's a sort of woman's outing, and goodness knows they do not have too many. You can spare her this time, and I'll see she gets there without the long tramp and comes back again safely."

Aunt Hannah yielded ungraciously. Not an hour ago she had said to the girl if she wanted to go to work anywhere else she might, for she, the elder lady, could do very well without her. Bessie stood ready to turn the tables against her, if she refused, on the score of not being able to

spare her. But Miss Gage remembered in time. She had found Bessie very ready to catch up any inadvertent remarks and quote her against herself when Roy was within hearing.

When Roy handed her out Thirza hurried up to them. She and Roy had been such firm friends that she did not want the pleasant relation strained by any thoughtless gossip. She was pleased that Roy should have brought Miss Deane over in this frank manner. She took Bessie's hand.

"I'm so glad you have come," she said, smiling to both of them, "but you didn't bring Miss Otis! I was sorry I did not insist more urgently, since this is one of Westhorpe's occasions. I can recall it as one of the great events of my childhood."

"I never thought—how stupid not to have asked her! But I only had a seat for one, and am going over to Knowlton. And we're rather out of the way of young people"—smiling kindly on the girl. "Bessie finds it quite lonely. You'll see that she has a good time, Thirza?"

"Can't you get back to supper? Quite a number of the young men are coming."

"Why—yes, I think so. That will make one less for Aunt Hannah, eh, Bessie," in a tone the young girl caught at once, and her lips parted in pretty curves. "I used to be fond of picnic suppers.

I was here last year. You see I do not turn my back on simple country pleasures as you do!"

He sprang into the wagon and nodded. Thirza drew Bessie's arm in hers and led her around, introducing her to some of the younger girls. She had never thought of it before, but what would be more natural than for Roy Palmer to take a fancy to this pretty child! She was quite surprised to find her a tolerable pianist, and as for her education it was up to the average of the girls who married, enough perhaps for the men who married them. And when it came to that, Aunt Hannah might be glad to have Bessie do as well. She had thought her rather light and frivolous, but perhaps she had not done her justice, and in her eagerness to make amends she quite won Bessie's heart by her charming cordiality.

Thirza was really glad to have some one to chaperon. She took her around among the young girls, and then there was a boat-load going out.

"Oh, do come, Miss Rolfe," cried two or three voices.

She glanced at Bessie's eager eyes and did not need to ask any question.

The cascade side of the river was shady in the afternoon. The broken shore was wonderfully picturesque, here a little point jutting out with shrubs and young trees to the very water's edge,

a fertile strip between the rocks that nature was making the most of. There a shelving under-rock making the water a clear gray in the shade, and full of iridescent lights where it caught a reflection of the sun.

The young people began to sing. She heard Bessie's voice in the light, gay strains. They were all so eager and full of fun, and presently Bessie really shone among them. It was the brightness and jollity of extreme youth. Had she been like that, Thirza wondered? The year before her father died—oh, how long ago it seemed. It was a happy thing to be young and care free, and feel that one need not take up any responsibility. Didn't life sometimes get weighted too soon with grave facts and purposes? Was there anything quite so sweet as youth and happiness and love? Why should marriage end so much of it?

And yet it was really better that most women should marry. There was some peculiar grace or wisdom or disinclination requisite for a happy single life, and employment that satisfied, that brought out the best of one's endeavor.

When they came back Mrs. Kent was plainly out of humor with Thirza, and flung out about her going off with that young crowd. "And I do wish you'd help with the table," she said crossly.

The table was nature's own providing, a large flat space of rock, broken off suddenly like a step, not so wide but that even on the river side you could sit about it comfortably. They spread some papers out and then laid the cloth. There was a fragrant aroma of coffee already in the air. Cold meats, cold chicken, bread, both brown and white; cake of every variety, jellies, canned fruits and berries in their natural state. She garnished with fern leaves and some of the smaller wild flowers, and made a charming picture of it.

Edith came running towards her with outstretched arms. Was this indeed Edith with delicious pink cheeks and brilliant eyes?

"We've been playing in a pretty cave with the dolls," she said breathlessly. "I've had such a good time! But oh, Aunt Thirza, I'm awful hungry. I'd just like to have some bread and butter and a piece of that lovely white chicken breast."

"So you shall, my dear." Thirza spread her bread.

"Oh, Aunt Thirza, couldn't you stay here always? Pa said you might just as well as not. And I said I'd coax you. Oh, Aunt Thirza, I do love you so," and with her free arm she hugged her aunt with a fervor that was startling in the usually undemonstrative child.

"Edith!" exclaimed her other aunt, sharply,

"run away and play with the children. You'll have the whole raft here begging for something to eat. I declare, Thirza, you haven't any more sense than a tabby cat! Now you pour tea or coffee — I don't care which. The old people are coming to the first table, for some of them want to get home before dark."

The elderly and middle-aged seated themselves around on the rocks cushioned now by wise forethought. They laughed and chatted, drank their tea leisurely and told their ages, at least those who were old enough to be proud of them, and exchanged reminiscences. It really was a pretty sight to Thirza. She wished it could be photographed.

Had Chris Morrow gone off in a huff? She was almost sure he had, from Clara's sharpness to her. It gave her a sense of relief.

There was a good deal of laughter when the first table began to rise. Two or three of the young men were ready to assist. The stage was waiting. They packed up their little traps, such as handkerchiefs and spectacles and in a few instances knitting, and bustled about for shawls and bonnets that had been placed on a ledge that made a convenient closet. Mrs. Rolfe wasn't old enough to go. Aunt Abby was at home to look after the supper and the baby. The rest of the children were running wild here.

The next table was full of jollity. The young men contingent had received several additions. Bessie was rendering herself very agreeable, perhaps a little more pronounced than Thirza quite approved, but there was a pretty coquetry about her that was really fascinating. There were other couples making love unblushingly, in the frank manner of honest-hearted, uncultured girls, and Bessie seemed delicate beside them.

Thirza was giving the children their supper, and could stop only now and then for a word or smile. Then Palmer made his appearance.

There was a vacant seat beside Bessie at that moment, though the young man had not meant to give up so delightful a place and only gone on an errand.

"Sit down here and have some supper," exclaimed Thirza, with brightening eyes. "Tea or coffee? You see I have my business quite by heart."

"It doesn't matter, really. Oh, tea I think. Well, has the good time come up to your expectations?" turning his eyes on Bessie with a half-humorous expression.

"It's been just splendid! Miss Rolfe has proved a fairy godmother, I was going to say, but she isn't old enough for such an office." And Bessie's face dimpled and lightened with generosity, she had been so happy.

"Are they always old?" inquired Thirza. She had a feeling that she looked about twenty, she had been getting so down to the children's level.

"I don't know; I never had a fairy godmother unless it was my own mamma. Not that Mrs. Deane was ever unkind to me. But Miss Rolfe has been just lovely," and the girl raised her baby eyes to Roy with the utmost satisfaction. "I've had just the loveliest time, and she has introduced me to so many delightful people. I've been rowing and rambling and singing, and we even danced a little to Mr. Marvin's violin. It had such a weird, exquisite sound over the water. Was it wrong — you see I don't quite know the distinctions here, and what makes a thing proper for an outsider."

She looked so arch and eager, yet there was a certain beseechingness, as if she begged them both not to judge her too harshly.

"I am glad you have had a good time. And, Thirza, I thank you sincerely for aiding and abetting it," smiling into her eyes.

There was something in Palmer's face she hardly knew how to take. Was Bessie's enjoyment of account to him, or was it his love for seeing every one about him happy and at ease?

"Oh, your tea," and she went down to the great tea-urn. "It must be slops by this time," she thought, so she steeped some new.

"Now, Thirza," began Mrs. Kent, "you just look up the children. We'll have Edith sick on our hands to-morrow — she's run so — crazy wild, and she isn't used to it. I'm packing my dishes without stopping to wash them, for John said he'd send the wagon half-past seven, sharp, and he'll take the children. Perhaps you better go with them. Mother'll be tired to death when she gets home."

"I must take this tea to Roy Palmer. I've been making it on purpose for him."

"Oh, have you been appointed tea-maker in chief to the young man?" inquired her sister, in angry sarcasm.

Thirza did not answer. Neither did she linger at the table. She resolved not to give color to any gossip about herself and Roy, so she went at once to look up the children. Edith was fanning herself with her dress skirt, while her hat hung round her neck, she looked so near to being pretty that Thirza stopped and kissed her.

"Oh, Aunt Thirza," she cried, "I am all run over with joy, I've had such a good time. I don't think I could hold any more. But I've torn my frock dreadfully."

"Never mind; we will get it mended to-morrow. Where are the other children?"

They were as elusive as eels. When you

caught one, the other disappeared. When the wagon came, Tom was missing.

"Oh, Miss Rolfe," and Bessie caught her hand, "won't you beg and induce Mr. Palmer to stay for the dancing? I do so want to dance in real earnest. I haven't danced in such a long, long while only just by myself, until that little an hour ago. You've been so kind to me all the afternoon that I know I oughtn't to ask another thing —"

"Are you going to stay?" asked Palmer, as if he were wavering betwixt two desires.

"I shall have to go; I am responsible for the well-being of my brother's little girl. But do stay, *do*," as she caught sight of Bessie's entreating eyes.

"Take your partners," called out a commanding voice. Bessie fluttered — there was no other word to express the eager expectance.

"Well, yes. Run off and dance."

A young fellow was waiting for her. But she took a step back and caught Thirza's hand, pressed it to her lips and vanished. It touched Miss Rolfe profoundly.

Palmer turned with her. "I think that is Tom's voice," she said, making her way to a group of little ones. Tom kicked and screamed, and Aunt Thirza would have had a sorry time but for the strong arms of her companion.

"I wish you could stay," he said persuasively. "I want to thank you for being so good to Bessie. You see her life is so different, and Aunt Hannah isn't at all used to young people. It's queer, isn't it, but somehow I feel as if she belonged to me instead of Aunt Hannah. I suppose I *do* understand—I'm in the habit of seeing young folks, though I'm not very gay myself. I wish Bessie was going to have a different home. Trying to circumvent another person to gain a little indulgence has a bad effect on the character in the long run,—do you not think so?"

"It is unfortunate." Thirza knew that she admired Aunt Hannah, that she could live with her in a most comfortable fashion, and she did not quite approve or understand Bessie.

"Aunt Hannah despised the mother and cannot love the child. That's the length and breadth of it. Bessie needs a friend—a young woman who hasn't outgrown a taste for pleasure. Thirza, if you were only going to stay here."

She was very glad circumstances would not admit of her taking a hand in the matter. Not that she would really object to befriending or advising the girl Roy Palmer would marry—she was quite sure it would end that way, and it would be an excellent thing for Bessie.

They had come up with the Kent group.

Grandma, the children, and numerous baskets were crowded in the wagon.

"Well—here you come at last! Mr. Palmer, please lift up Tom. Children, make room for Aunt Thirza."

"Oh, you can't go in that crowd," subjoined Palmer. "See here, I'll take Miss Rolfe. My wagon is at liberty."

"But I want her to be at home to attend to the children. They've nearly driven mother crazy now. It's the last time I'll ever go out with such a raft. I said so last year. Tom, you'll catch it good when I get home, mind that. Can't you make room?"

Before they had, Palmer came with his wagon, and in spite of protests handed in Thirza.

"Now we will take the lead, and you need not worry, Mrs. Kent. Thirza will be there to give them a home welcome," laughingly.

She could have wished Roy Palmer hundreds of miles away. She was so committed to Chris Morrow that she could hardly see a virtue in him, and was quite sure Thirza would accept him during the drive.

But, somehow, he had never developed that kind of a penchant for Thirza Rolfe, much as he liked her. All their talk was of Bessie, and Thirza decided a husband like this would be the making

of a volatile, unformed girl like Bessie Deane. There was so much patient tenderness in his nature; she almost said commonplace. Like many another young philosopher she considered the commonplace a safer ground than the higher extrêmes.

She had the tired children in bed when Mrs. Kent came home. Her mother was making some curious half-personal surmises about Palmer.

"I shouldn't wonder at all if he took that Miss Deane. She is very pretty, and he does evince a great interest in her welfare."

She thought that a wisely ambiguous speech, a barricade for herself as well.

"Railly!" Mrs. Rolfe often lapsed into the provincialisms of her girlhood. "Railly, now! Well, I s'pose Aunt Hannah could train her if there's any train to her, but her mother was a flighty thing. And she hasn't a penny; Aunt Hannah told me so herself. But I s'pose she'll get all the old lady's savings!"

Mrs. Rolfe had been twisting up her back hair in a neat little knot, and put her night-cap on. She couldn't make up her mind to sleep without one.

CHAPTER VII

THROUGH OTHER EYES

WHETHER Thirza Rolfe would have helped or hindered, whether fate plays strange pranks with human destinies, and we go straight on to the things some invisible power has laid out for us, or whether with a wise foresight we might have avoided the ills, will always be an open question.

The day after the picnic Thirza took her small niece home. Clara was cross and tired. She was aching to give Thirza a piece of her mind as regarding Chris Morrow's prospects, but that wise young woman skilfully parried it. And when John Kent announced at the dinner table he had to go over to Oxford, Thirza proposed that he should take Edith home, as it was right on the way. Clara had fretted so about the child that she could not in reason protest. She was rather jealous of the newly developed love of Edith for her auntie.

"Well," and Kent nodded acquiescently. "But I shan't be back before nine or ten. I'm bound to have some money out of a fellow, if it takes

me all night, and I think I shall stay two or three days."

Edith didn't want to go a bit, but they were to buy some material for a new frock; the torn one was sadly outgrown, and the promise of some pretty ribbons soothed the child.

They found Mrs. Rolfe in bed with a sick headache, and Aunt Thirza was very welcome. That night a raging fever set in, and for the next fortnight Thirza was nurse and housekeeper. She hired a woman to come in to clean up, and do the laundry work, and that no one should have any call to complain, paid for it herself. The house took on a new aspect, the meals were regular, and Aunt Thirza made so many nice things that the children wanted her to stay always. Mother was to come out, but a rather serious indisposition kept her at home. It seemed to be thought in the family that Thirza "knew no more about house-keeping than a cat," and a dozen times a day they groaned about poor Seth. Though poor Seth wouldn't admit it, he had a surreptitious feeling that he was in clover. The new crop of potatoes was delicious, the squash were no longer watery, and such biscuit! Even the bread was a success. Eggs were cooked as Seth never knew them to be cooked before.

For a week Laura was too ill and too much worn

out to care what happened. Then she began to worry a little lest Seth's meals shouldn't be right, "for of course Thirza isn't any kind of a cook and has had no experience," she said. But when she was able to come to the sitting-room, there was something cheering in the cleanliness and good order, and the children had mysteriously changed. For an ignorant, unpractical girl, with her head full of "pictures and things," Thirza certainly had done well.

"You ought to get married and have a home of your own, Thirza," she said.

"I can have the home — I have had it already," was the response.

"It isn't anything without husband and children. There can't be a real interest in it. And what is it for?"

"For myself. I don't know but a woman is of as much account as a man." Thirza felt her temperature rising.

"But it is a shame for you to turn into a strong-minded woman, Thirza. We don't think so much of the old maids crying sour grapes, but you're young enough to marry well, and with a little practice you'd make a real nice housekeeper. You don't fluster, as Clara does. Clara always makes me nervous, she seems so strong and vigorous. You're gentle and slow moving, and don't find fault continually. But then you have nothing to

find fault about. Husbands are trying, the best of them, and no one knows the care of children until they come to have them."

Slow moving, indeed! Thirza thought she had moved pretty rapidly during the last fortnight to a good deal of purpose; but Laura was the most illogical of women, and there was no use of arguing. They came quite near a quarrel about her gift of the five hundred dollars. Seth undertook to explain to his wife, but she flared up in a moment. Edith wasn't any better than Hazel, and she wouldn't have one child set above the other and dissension made in the family. "And Hazel will grow up to hate you and be envious of her sister. If you can't treat them alike, you needn't give it at all!" cried the mother, indignantly. Thirza felt strongly inclined to take back the proffer, but Seth looked at her with a fervent entreaty in his eyes.

"It seems such a trifle when divided," Thirza replied, with a touch of sharpness, "but you may arrange it to your liking, and their father can pay it to them when they come of age, not before."

So that matter was settled. Seth got up the old buggy one afternoon and took his sister and her belongings over to Kent's. Laura cried on her neck and said she had been very good to care for her and the children, and didn't see why she couldn't content herself to stay and spend the time between

her and Clara, if she was so bound to be an old maid. "But I suppose some day you'll be voting and running for office!" was her Parthian arrow.

Edith clung around her neck with heartbreaking fondness, and begged to come and live with Auntie Thirza, "because I love you better than anybody," sobbed the poor child in a whisper.

It seemed such a long while since the picnic and her leaving Clara. She had seen Roy Palmer several times, and once he had brought Miss Otis to call upon her. Going home they had stopped for a little ramble about the cascade, and afterward she had been confined to the house a week or so with a small mishap. Thirza had been requested by a business house that was to employ her considerably the coming year, to be on hand as early as possible in September. So there were only about ten days. Old Mrs. Rolfe had improved somewhat, but was still weak.

It seemed to Thirza she could never be so glad of anything as the chance to lead her own life again. Her own life. When a woman looked forward to years of single living, did she unconsciously narrow her interests? Was Clara broad and sympathetic? As for Seth's wife, had not she as good a right to make some object chief with herself? Laura, she observed, was very jealous about her motherhood. Maiden aunts were

good in an emergency, and to bring gifts, but no one wanted to share great joys with them.

Thirza had almost to fight to get a day for Aunt Hannah. Her one brief call with Clara and two of the children had been unsatisfactory. There was a touch of constraint about Helen Otis, and yet she had said with a certain vehemence, "I am so glad you are going back to New York so I shall not lose you." Bessie had given her a quick, questioning glance. Had she misread the face before, or was there more depth of purpose than she had imagined? It had been a rather curious three weeks to Bessie. She had been happy the evening of the picnic. She had danced and chaffed, been coquettish and tried her charms greatly to her own satisfaction. If only she could be somewhere making the best of them, and getting a husband. Aunt Hannah had not given up the dressmaking scheme. She had no idea of Bessie idling away her time with drumming on the piano and making excuses to get down town. She didn't want any help when the boarders were gone.

This evening had established, or rather riveted, a certain claim on Palmer. Bessie felt as they were riding home that she might so work upon his pity and sympathy that he would offer to marry her. She would like the triumph over

Aunt Hannah. She would like to go driving about Westhorpe in a pony carriage. Roy could surely afford one; and the farm horses were too large for her fancy. She could make him buy a piano; he was growing very fond of music, but it would be stupid to sing whole evenings to him after they were married. He cared so little for dancing, for small talk, and merriment, so she had sense enough to see he was not the kind of a man she wanted, that it was not the life she craved. But how to get into this other life?

She had been grudging and jealous of Thirza. She could not understand the frank demeanor of a woman who desired nothing beyond friendship; but the afternoon of the picnic Thirza had given him to her too generously for a woman who cared to win a man. She need not fear Thirza. Perhaps the girl disdained plain farm life. Bessie knew by the thrill in her heart that nothing would delight her more than to go to a big city and do something. Not to be hidden away, not to work from morning till night, but to have leisure and evening company, as these two girls were at liberty to do. Here was where she envied them.

Something in Bessie's demeanor a few evenings afterward, struck Miss Otis with apprehension. Ward had been over. He was going off on a vacation, and he seemed restless.

"One gets into a rut in a place like this," he said, with a touch of scorn in his tone. "I have a feeling I ought to strike for something larger and better, that would take me out into the big world. I suppose it would be a good thing to read up for my next degree and start out with a Ph.D. I dare say I would be more likely to obtain a hearing."

"What has roused you up, Ward?" said Roy. "There are enough restless and dissatisfied people in the world already, pushing and scrambling for the high places. There isn't so much room at the top as we imagine. The great majority of the people must be content to march along as ordinary soldiers. There must be whole regiments of them to the few commissioned officers."

"But if I were a man, I should want to be a general," said Bessie. "I wouldn't want to be a common soldier."

She was sitting on the step below Roy. Something in her attitude, the manner in which she raised her eyes and then let them droop slowly, the soft smile coming and going, the restless little hands that now and then wandered so near his, the pretty, half-pettish voice as she argued from Ward's standpoint, but with the inconsequence of ignorance, seemed done for effect. Miss Otis watched it with a feeling of protest.

But these strong, tender, unquestioning sort of men were often attracted by just such women. Did Miss Carew use some of these arts to win her father?

A curious sense of indignation swept imperiously through her mind. She hated scheming women. Could this man be saved from the petty fascinating arts of this selfish shallow girl who had no true views of life, who made everything revolve about her wants and trivial pleasures? She would either despoil his future, or if he was strong enough to surmount these obstacles, she would be miserable and make him so as well.

Miss Gage came out, and in five minutes Bessie was sent off on an errand. An angry light flashed up in her face, then she turned it with entreaty to Palmer. But she rose to obey.

"What was it—a pitcher of water?" asked Roy. "I'll go and get some, fresh from the well, from the north side."

Bessie had glided off to the kitchen. "I'll go myself," said Miss Gage, stiffly. "There is no sense in disturbing you, and there was some fresh on the kitchen table."

"You will just sit here until I come back," he replied.

"I am sorry," began Miss Brooke, who saw only the little disturbance.

"I wanted some myself. I am glad you mentioned it," declared Palmer. Aunt Hannah bit her lip, and a line settled between her brows. It always happened so. She invariably played into their hands, it seemed.

Helen Otis read the story in one of those quick, intuitive flashes. Miss Gage was motherly fond of Roy. She was anxious, too, concerning Bessie's welfare; and had confided something of this to Aunt Margaret. But a marriage between these two people would not be at all to her fancy.

"He really is worthy of some nobler woman," Helen thought. True, he teased Thirza about her advanced ideas, but he liked her very much, and they might draw nearer together, they held so many beliefs in common. Bessie returned, laughing and triumphant. Did Mr. Palmer understand it? Bessie was weaving snares.

Helen Otis was too inexperienced to come to a man's rescue. She longed to talk the matter over with Thirza; she had a heroic idea that Palmer ought to be saved, at least not be allowed to go on blindly. She saw dozens of little tricks, now. Some of them Aunt Hannah did frustrate. And she interposed at times. Aunt Margaret was a good deal interested in him, and she gently drew him into their circle, much to Bessie's discomfiture. It made the days more entertaining to

Helen, now that she no longer had Thirza. What should she have done all the long summer without him? She went over to the Rolfes' with him one afternoon, but they found Thirza so engrossed that Miss Otis would not make a long call.

"Now," Palmer said, "we'll take the mountain drive that your aunt turns from in dismay. I really thought you would never get it, for there is no telling how long Thirza may stay at her brother's. At least, if you would like it?"

"Oh, I just should. I am not afraid with your driving," she answered.

"Thank you for the confidence. I never run into needless danger," and he smiled. There was something fine and thoughtful in his face to-day. She had remarked it a few times before, since she had come to study him. She liked his reliance in his own strength, though he never made any parade of it.

It was a curious and rather rough drive on the opposite side of the mountain. The last of the laurels were withering on their stalks, and the great bare spikes of the rhododendrons had not all fallen off, but looked like armed sentinels. There were a good many pines and cedars on this side that gave it a rather sombre aspect. The different features apparently changed the landscape.

"There are so many varieties in the view," she

said. "This is wilder, and yet you seem to see farther."

The horse stood still some moments. She wished Thirza was here, with her keen, artistic sight. "If you care to go any farther, we shall have to walk. At all events, you had better get out while I turn the horse." There was a wagon road a short distance farther up, used for hauling logs, then a winding path. Then Palmer added:

"There is one view I would like you to see. It is grand where some of the others are simply fine."

"Yes," she assented. He took her arm, to assist her. Even here the rocky mountain cropped out. After they had gone some distance they came to one of the queer shelves again, and he helped her up, springing lightly after her.

"Are you steady-headed?"

"Oh, quite so. I ought to be, after the climbs abroad."

"Yes, I forgot," he said. "Ward and I generally take an autumn tramp up here. The coloring is magnificent an hour or so before sunset."

"I can believe that. Do you realize what a wonderful variety there is in this mountain? One could explore it for years. I envy artists."

"Oh, don't go any nearer the edge," he entreated. She turned and smiled, but she was not silly enough to doubt his better judgment.

"We can enjoy if we cannot make pictures," he said. "Look at this great fissure! It was not here in the spring. Come here to the safe side."

"You make a very careful guide," Miss Otis returned, smiling. She stepped back. There was a curious grating sound, a sort of crushing, grinding movement. "Oh!" she cried in terror, and unconsciously clung to Palmer. He drew her still farther back, for the fissure was widening. They both watched it with fascinated, terror-stricken eyes. It went down with a dull, tearing crash.

"Oh," he cried, "we stood there a moment ago. Thank God you are safe." He held her more tightly to his side and took a few steps farther in among the beds of tree roots. She was trembling violently, but she made a great effort and gave a ghost of a smile as she said: "We are safe. And now that the real danger is over I cannot be sorry that I went — as I really ought to be, I suppose. Only we must not speak of it at home."

"No, no; they would never forgive me."

She turned and glanced up in his face. Hers was very white, and her eyes held some marvellous depths. In a tremulous tone she asked: "Do you realize that you were in the same danger, that you would have gone as well?"

It seemed such a pointed remark to her after

she had uttered it that she turned away with a sense of embarrassment.

"There would have been no one near and dear to break his heart over me," Palmer replied with gentle gravity that restored her self-respect at once. "With you it would have been different. Not that I should be eager to throw away life. To-day I desire it more than ever for what it promises. There is a great deal of talk about the ambitions of youth, but I think those of riper years and fuller experiences are richer and more trustworthy. I am just beginning to learn what is possible, though I do not quite know what I want. Thirza Rolfe stirs one like a clarion, and yet she has not given up one womanly quality, so far as I can see."

There was another rush of the rock on its downward descent. He grasped her arm again, then both smiled faintly.

"We missed a landslide just by one day, when we were in the Alps. I must be careful of the third adventure," she began, more to break the tense situation than from any feeling of superstition.

"God keeps us from a good many dangers," he subjoined reverently. "We shall never know all."

He stood a moment with his eyes raised to heaven. His lips moved with no audible sound.

"Can you go down now?" She bowed her head in acquiescence. He partly led, partly carried her.

"Let us walk down to the next level," he said. Her face had grown still more colorless, but he thought it had never been so beautiful. There was a touch of tremor about her that gave her a sort of fascinating weakness he had never associated with her before. Indeed, the footing had been so purely that of business, that he had included the utmost courtesy as well. She would go her way when autumn came and that would end the acquaintance. But it could not be ended in that manner now. This brief while had changed him to himself.

"Now you had better try the carriage again," he said. "There is not the slightest danger, for the rest of the road is not very steep." They drove around a turn and found the piece of rock had caught itself in the débris of trees and gravel that had come down with it, and looked really remarkable, suspended in a curious manner.

"It must be dislodged," he said, "or it may come the rest of the way with more fatal consequences. I will get some of the men to go up to-morrow. Except for the danger, it has a fine effect hanging there. When a fissure occurs,

the rains, and often the gravel, works in until it acts like a wedge. You must get some color in your cheeks," he added, with solicitude.

"Am I very pale?" She raised her eyes inquiringly, and they fell with some sudden emotion that startled herself.

"Not now. Get on, Hector. Then when we come out to the sunshine you will be warmed up."

They hardly exchanged another word during the drive, yet neither could have formulated the vague thoughts that floated through each brain. The broad porch was deserted. Palmer handed Miss Otis out. A harmless little bit of block lay in the path. She stepped on the edge just as he had taken his hand from her arm and half turned. He saw the flutter of her dress as she went down on one knee. "What is it?" he cried, raising her at once.

"I trod on something and have wrenched my ankle, but it will be all right in a moment. Don't call any one."

He picked up the small cause of the accident. "Isn't it absurd," she said. "The thing that might have been serious had no result, and here I stumble on such a little thing. Go put out your horse. I shall be all right. It is nothing."

He turned at her bidding. She had smiled

before this at his literal fashion of taking requests, quite as if they were commands. She watched him as he went towards the barn.

She made an attempt to go up the few steps and winced at the pain, and seating herself in Aunt Margaret's rocker, began to unbutton her boot. Her ankle was swelling already. Aunt Hannah came out of the kitchen, glanced down and up, then crossed over to her.

"I thought maybe you'd bring Thirza back with you. Is Mrs. Seth really ill? She's always kinder complaining. Oh, what's the matter! You're white as a ghost."

Helen explained. "And please help me upstairs."

"It's nothing to be really alarmed about," Miss Gage said, when she had examined it. "I'll fix it up for you; and we'll have most of the swelling out by morning. It's a sort of wrench. I've doctored 'em up many a time."

In a few moments she had steeped some wormwood in vinegar, and when it was bandaged Helen declared it began to feel better at once. But she did not come down to dinner or tea. Roy wanted to go for a doctor, but Aunt Hannah rather scouted the idea.

"But there may be some nervous shock —"

"She isn't the nervous kind. Don't you worry

about her ; just wait until morning. She's making as light as possible of it, because she doesn't want to worry her aunts."

They remained up-stairs with her. A neighbor came in during the evening to ask counsel of Aunt Hannah. Bessie meant to have a nice time on the porch with Roy; but she found him very dull, and disinclined to sympathize with her small woes.

Miss Otis was much improved the next morning, but had her breakfast sent up to her. When she found her aunts insisting on remaining with her, she suffered herself to be carried down by Palmer, and up again at night. Was there a curious new tenderness in his demeanor toward her? Bessie thought so, and all her jealousy was roused. Not that she exactly believed that Miss Otis would want to marry him. It was the indefinable something that was above Bessie, the influence that made him grave and distant to her without at all realizing there was any change. She watched every glance, weighed every word, hated the subjects of which she knew nothing and cared less. She worked herself up to a passion that had the fervor of love. Miss Otis had no right to engross him continually. Would the summer ever come to an end?

It was hastening on apace. Helen was using her best efforts to detach Palmer, not simply from

Bessie, but from the too ready acceptance of a lower plane of life; and sometimes she was surprised at the ease with which he advanced. He had no restless ambitions to try the large world, such as Ward had expressed. He loved his farm, his native town, and he had a deep passion for nature that, if she had only known he had never talked these things over with any one but her, would have touched her more keenly still.

Helen Otis had experienced an almost ungracious apprehension, that first day in her solitude, that Roy might assume some indefinable familiarity; but he was his simple self — gracious, manly, quite at their service as before. Now and then eyes answered eyes in a strange secret, that was all each thought. But Bessie's jealous glance saw farther, and yet did not see truly.

They had been sitting alone on the old porch this last evening of her stay and the conversation had turned on Thirza. Miss Otis was too high-minded and honest to desire to win this man's love, much as she had come to admire him. True, she had fancied Bernard Ward cared for Thirza, but she saw no signs of tenderness on her part. She had some high and fine theories of love such as most girls indulge in before they have had any real experience in the matter.

Thirza admired Palmer for many strong and

attractive qualities. There were friendships that ripened into love. With a little exultation she bethought herself that in this manner she could keep them both for friends. Thirza was fond of the old Palmer place. What a home she would make of it! Aunt Hannah would go on as housekeeper — she cared a great deal for Thirza — why, was there not some desire lingering in her mind that this might happen? Miss Otis felt that she had really unearthed Miss Gage's hope. Yet it would be one of the perfect marriages when they came to understand each other sympathetically.

Bessie had hurried through her work, wrought up to a pitch of desperation by the many last things Aunt Hannah had found for her to do. Of course Miss Otis would use her best endeavors to make Royal Palmer commit himself, yet Bessie was quite sure she did not care to marry him.

Two of the railroad men drove up the old lane, as it was called, and stopped at the side entrance to see Mr. Palmer a few moments. No, they would not get out for the brief errand.

Aunt Hannah had her hands in the flour. Bessie ran around. She paused by the great rose tree that oddly enough had flowered a second time, a curious, fragrant white rose, "sign of a wedding," some one had said, which Aunt Hannah extinguished by insisting it was a sign of

death, and had bloomed that way the year Mrs. Palmer had died.

Bessie announced her errand. Both faces had a mysterious look to her, softened and yet betrayed by the moonlight, the girl thought. She caught at Roy's hand, but he took no notice. All her soul filled with the resentment of weeks, she grasped her rival's arm and confronted her with a flushed countenance and passionate light in her eyes.

"I suppose it is the last night of the play!" she began in rapid, desperate tones. "Have you succeeded in your designs? You know you do not mean to marry him. When you get back to the city it will be like the woman in the poem, 'pastime ere you went to town.' You wouldn't be buried alive in such a place as this. And I love him! I loved him the first night I came. He was so sweet and tender and made me so welcome. He has fought Aunt Hannah for my sake. She hates me. You have all the world to choose from, and I had only him. He was mine until you tried to detach him from me with your arts. It means nothing to you how much you make others suffer; how you wreck their lives."

She had spoken in one rapid rush of words, her cheeks glowing, her eyes kindling with an emotion that seemed to stir her heart's blood, that

convinced her at the moment that she loved Royal Palmer with her whole soul.

Miss Otis was amazed beyond everything. She shook off the girl's clasp as she rose to her feet.

"I — you are altogether mistaken," in a haughty tone that trembled with indignation.

"Do you mean to marry him? No, you do not," as Miss Otis' lips moved without a sound. "But you have led him on to think you would. You have filled his mind with foolish longings and ambitions. He will never be anything but a plain common man. He doesn't care for society. You will ruin his life and mine —"

"Hush, hush!" imperiously. "You have allowed anger and suspicion to run away with common sense. I have had no such thought —"

"And love," Bessie interrupted. "You have tried to keep him from loving me, but you will not prevail. Or if you do, you will ruin his life, and my broken heart will lie at your door."

With a curious, haunting cry Bessie vanished. Miss Otis stood trembling and astounded. Had she any right to interfere with their lives unless she meant to marry him, and no such thought had crossed her mind.

CHAPTER VIII

A TRAGEDY

HELEN OTIS spent a nervous, restless night. It was foolish to let this girl's anger trouble her. Did Roy Palmer care for her, Bessie, in the sense of desiring to win her? She had fancied at first that one could easily foretell the end of this pastoral romance. But she felt now, with a positive inward assurance, that she could not have put in words to any human being, that there were some fine possibilities in Palmer that would not only be thwarted by the influence of such a woman, but wholly nullified. With a mind like Thirza's—yet there was nothing but good comradeship between them. Did even Thirza appreciate all his excellencies?

There was nothing in this mental question to stir her temperature, but she did experience an uncomfortable flush even in her cheeks. She would not follow out this reasoning. But Roy could not have been very much in love with Bessie during the brief interim before her aunt came. He was not lover-like. In her mind she convicted

Bessie of falsehood. Did the girl love him? Could she make herself content with the surroundings, the pursuits of his life? She ridiculed and sneered at it. Perhaps her anger had been merely a jealous coquetry.

How should she meet her in the morning? Helen would have liked not to see her again. She did try to dismiss the matter; but one of the first sounds she heard was Bessie's gay voice carolling a snatchy little song as she swept off the porch. Then she called to Roy, and he answered in a cordial tone.

It was the finer nature that experienced the embarrassment. Helen felt that she had no right to have this secret of Bessie's flung at her in such a rude manner. She wished she did not know it. But Bessie was in a delightful mood, helpful to Aunt Hannah, courteous with a charming shade of deference to Miss Brooke, and naively innocent to herself, quite ignoring the scene of last night. And though Bessie Deane could not have analyzed the component parts, she intuitively guessed at some of the secret springs. Miss Otis would be distant, perhaps a shade colder toward Roy Palmer. If he had taken any heart of grace, any hope of future intimacy, the demeanor of Miss Otis, with her nervous self-consciousness, would destroy it. Bessie noted that she did not address a single

sentence to him, and answered him with evident constraint.

After that there was a gentle sort of confusion. The trunks came down and were sent off. Miss Brooke had a little aside with Miss Gage, while Bessie flew about her work in a cheery fashion. Helen devoted herself to Aunt Esther, who seemed a good deal moved by the prospect of parting, perhaps from the sub-conscious misgiving that this would be her last summer anywhere. It had been very pleasant, and Roy Palmer, in his kindly, thoughtful fashion, had helped make it so. She had liked his friend Ward very much, and though she could not quite approve of independent careers for women, Miss Rolfe did not seem so far out of the way, according to her lights.

Miss Margaret Brooke went out to Bessie.

"My dear," she said, with a softness in her tone that was next to emotion, "I want to thank you for your readiness to oblige my sister and myself, and all your kindness. I want you to accept this little gift," and she squeezed something in her hand. "I hope your future will be a pleasant one, and that some day we shall hear of your being very happy."

Bessie blushed. Did she suspect Roy Palmer would be concerned in the happiness?

In a few moments they were driving away in

the same manner they had come. Miss Otis' veil was pinned tightly to her hat, not in any easy fashion that she could raise. Bessie nodded to herself in satisfaction. Miss Otis would not look at Roy the second time to marry him; so why should she wind even the charm of intelligence and appreciation about him, and rouse vague hopes? Bessie looked upon herself almost as his saviour by her resolute stroke of last night.

As for Palmer, he was keenly touched by the evident endeavor of Miss Otis to preserve a little distance between them. They had been so frank and friendly after the first week or two. Not that he had been dreaming of any foolishness—it would have seemed so to him. He was innately honorable, and she belonged to her father for the present. She was just beginning a beautiful life under such different auspices. He would not have moved a finger to interfere with it if he could. There were better things, wider opportunities than his narrow life had ever taken in—they were her birthright—he would have to go groping along for years before he could reach them. Thirza had grown so different from her contact with that great world; finer, higher, stronger in her manner of viewing many things. She had dropped so much of the littleness and the triviality

of women. And this other girl had begun large, had developed in ways of culture.

He had meant to say something about a future acquaintance, if he should come to the city. Thirza had laughingly invited him to her menage. But every moment a little stiffness seemed to fall between them, like a cloud spreading itself over the serene heavens.

There were some trifling favors to perform for the travellers. He took Miss Esther's arm as the train came in, and accompanied her to her chair in the drawing-room coach. Then, a rather hurried good-bye. Had he any reason to expect any more?

He drove back, put out his horses, and went straight over to the fields. Aunt Hannah began at once to clean house, so as to restore the olden order before cold weather set in. By night Bessie was tired and cross, and Roy went off somewhere, leaving them to themselves. Aunt Hannah sat and nodded, and Bessie presently flounced off to bed. What could one do a whole long winter? But if she were mistress here —

Bessie Deane decided that it was the best thing she could do. She could think of some more desirable positions. A clerk in a store in the city would be more to her taste; but she saw no means of getting to that desired haven without some pre-

liminary hardships, which she did not desire to take. And though, during the first fortnight here, she had believed herself in love with Roy, one of the swift, unreasoning, overwhelming fancies, so often miscalled love at first sight, she had wavered curiously. She had been jealous since; was not that another sign? Possibly she might meet with some one more to her fancy, if she was rich, like Miss Otis—but would she want to wait five or six years like Thirza Rolfe? Roy Palmer wasn't poor; Aunt Hannah had said he could hold up his head with some of the best in town. He should, when she was his wife. She would soon have him out of these old-fashioned ways.

Somehow Bessie found imaginary conquests much easier than real ones. Roy was deeply engrossed with the new road where they were surveying, and planning for supplies. There was timber to be cut, fences to be moved. Sometimes he took his lunch with him. In the evening he was tired and abstracted. It had come off quite cool, and there was no loitering on the great porch. The fire in the sitting-room felt good. Sometimes Bessie stole away and played on the piano, but the very music was dull when no one came to listen.

Meanwhile the house had been put in order, the fall pickling and preserving was done, and Aunt

Hannah one day set the future plainly before Bessie.

"I couldn't leave you enough to take care of yourself," she said, "and I may live years yet. You can't reasonably expect Royal Palmer, who is no kith or kin, to support you; and any girl of spirit would be too proud. I should be ashamed of it, myself. I've had a talk with Miss Cummings and Mrs. Barstow. Mrs. Barstow will keep you through the week; for it is too far to walk in and out, with bad weather coming on presently. You'll be able to take good care of yourself in six months' time; I've been talking it over with Roy."

There was a great lump in Bessie's throat, a hot anger in her heart.

"Oh, if he wants me turned out!" she cried passionately.

"No such thing, Bessie Deane! He'd be willing to keep you; but I have some pride, if you have not. I've earned my bread since my poor father thought fit to share his with a stranger; and, surely, you wouldn't want to hang on Roy Palmer year in and year out! There's nothing for you to do, but just putter 'round — there's not enough to keep me busy half the time. Now, if you were his kin, instead of mine, I would not raise my voice against it. Mrs. Barstow's offer is a good one. She does some of the best work in town."

"I shall not go," said the young girl, decisively.

"What, then?" Aunt Hannah looked over the top of her glasses; but there was decision in her eyes.

"Well — I'll starve first! I hate the thought of dressmaking." Bessie's eyes flashed fire.

"Perhaps you'd rather live out?"

Bessie absolutely screamed in dismay.

"There, there! Don't go in a tantrum, Bessie; I am only thinking of your good."

Her good! She could give her so many chances to see Roy. For a month she had watched her as a cat watches a mouse. She did not want her to marry Roy Palmer — that was plain. And why not?

Any other woman would be glad. Yes, Aunt Hannah hated her for her poor mamma's sake.

"I'll write to the Deanes," she declared.

"I wrote three weeks ago," returned Aunt Hannah, coolly. "Mrs. Deane advised that you be trained to take care of yourself. There are plenty of women doing it who are not compelled. Come, don't be an idiot, and you most eighteen."

Bessie was in a white heat of indignation. As well throw herself against a rock as appeal to this grim woman. She sprang up, lighted her lamp, and flounced out of the room. Once in her own chamber, she gave way to a passion of tears. She could have torn the very counterpane to tatters.

To be sent away the whole week through! Oh, what could she do to circumvent this old woman?

She lay there on her bed half the night, it seemed to her. But it could not have been, for presently Aunt Hannah finished the evening chores and came up. What kept Roy out so much? She strained her attention, too, for once or twice she heard a sound. Ah, yes. That was horse's hoofs. He was going out to the barn. She put up her hands to make a little blind for her eyes, and looked long and eagerly out of the window. Yes—there he came. He had an unearthly habit of sitting alone, reading, or drawing plans or calculations. She had been considering an appeal to him. What if she crept down softly now?

It seemed daring, enticing to her. She could so rarely see him alone, that she excused herself. She opened her door and drew a long breath. He raked the stove a little. There was a sound as of moving the big chair. She stepped out into the hall, sat on the stairs a moment, and then trod very lightly. One step creaked. Then she raised the old-fashioned latch cautiously. Roy had not heard her. He was reading some sheets of paper, and laid one down. She was so near. Why could he not feel it?

"Roy," she said softly, "Roy—oh, don't make a sound!" holding up her small hands entreatingly.

Her golden hair was floating down her back. There was something weird about her sudden appearance, and for a moment he could not speak.

"I'm so wretched. I had to come to tell you, Roy, I'm going away. I can't stand it."

She leaned over the arm of the chair. Her eyes were full of tears, and her pretty mouth and chin quivered. She moved him inexplicably.

"Going away — Bessie —"

He touched her arm with his fingers. Was she walking in her sleep! Or was he dreaming?

"Yes; Aunt Hannah has as good as turned me out. I have a little money. I shall go away — it doesn't matter where, since I am not wanted here. And if I don't find friends, I can only die in the end," and a sob choked her.

"Bessie!" He could never have told who made the movement. He raised his arm and put it over her shoulder, and she seemed to drop into his lap, like a poor fluttering bird, giving a sigh of content.

"I thought at first you liked me. It was no plan of mine coming here, and how should I know the home wasn't really Aunt Hannah's? And I tried so hard to please! I've been a little slave all summer. I thought maybe I had earned some right to a home. But I wish she had never sent for me. It's been nothing but pain and misery.

And as for the dressmaking scheme—I hate it! I'll kill myself first!”

She was sobbing softly now, and her head went down on his shoulder. Roy looked at her in a dazed fashion. She was so small and helpless.

“I told Aunt Hannah there was no need of your going. She ought to have some one, and I am likely to be out so much now. You shall stay. Why, your keep wouldn't be more than that of a kitten, and there is an abundance of everything —”

Bessie made a gesture of protest, and partly raised her head, enough for him to see her tear-wet eyes and tremulous rose-red lips.

“I have no real claim on you. Oh,” with a fling of bitterness, “she has made me understand that! The home is yours. I am no kin to you! But I wanted to tell you how it was, so when you come home some night and hear a long tale of my ingratitude, you will know why I couldn't stay. And there have been so many pleasant times when —”

“You must stay, child.”

“But you see, if I was *your* half-sister, it would make a world of difference! No; I shall just go off quietly —”

“You shall not, Bessie.”

What did he mean to say? Oh, heavens! if

she only were his little sister! She was like a trusting baby in his arms. The sobs shook her. A poor, friendless, homeless little girl, too pretty to take a rough turn with the world. She must stay. He would insist to Aunt Hannah, and the foolish scheme of dressmaking would be given up.

He gave a long sigh. She crept closer. Her warm tears fell on his hand and moved him immeasurably. He was man enough to see how he could be something more to her, have the right to care for her. Why, three months ago he almost dreamed of this. What had changed him? For there was some mysterious change, some new understanding of himself and the man he wished to be. When he reached that height —

The clock ticked solemnly. It seemed the turning-point of a lifetime. Pity, sympathy, the desire to give this eager little butterfly a pleasant life, the curious inward protest, and he felt himself pulled both ways, unable to decide.

They did not hear the stir above them. Then a sharp voice called, "Bessie! Bessie!"

She started, but clung closer to him. Her small hands grasped entreatingly. Her frightened, pleading child's face was upraised, it moved nearer his, and before he was even aware of an impulse, he had kissed down amid the tears.

A quick, piercing cry for help startled them.

Roy put her down and ran. There was a strange blaze of light in the little hall, and another cry, this time a shriek.

Aunt Hannah stood in Bessie's room all in a blaze. The curtains had burned and fallen to the floor. She had reached out for the quilt on the bed, but some kind of terror had deprived her of her usual presence of mind. He caught it and wrapped her tight as she fell to the floor.

"Bessie, quick!" he cried.

But when Bessie came up, it was only to shriek and wring her hands. The blue and yellow flames were running over the fuzz of the carpet. He was shuffling it out, and smothering the blaze about Aunt Hannah, who only moaned now.

Then he began to unroll her. "Bring another blanket," he said to Bessie, and with that he carried her to her room. "Put out every spark of fire; but oh, for the love of heaven, be careful!"

He laid Aunt Hannah on her own bed. She moaned in a half-unconscious manner. The flames were subdued; but how severely she was burned was beyond his telling. A doctor must be had at once.

"Bessie, I am going over to the Austens' to get some one to go for a doctor."

She raised her lovely, terrified eyes. "Be brave," he pleaded, taking both hands. She in-

clined her head forward, and for the second time he kissed her.

"Oh, what shall I do! I have never seen any one die. Let me go to the Austens'. Oh, Roy!"

She was clinging to him, and sobbing hysterically. Her soft, wet cheek was pressed against his.

"I shall die here alone," she cried. "Let me go with you."

He quite forgot her selfishness at the moment, so deep was his pity for her terror.

He spoke to Aunt Hannah, and besought her to answer. She moaned, but did not move. He was afraid himself to open the blanket.

"I must go. Let me carry you down-stairs," and he picked her up, depositing her in the arm-chair he had left such a few moments before. "Be my brave girl," he said, and the next instant he had vanished.

Left alone, Bessie's weeping subsided into an occasional sob, though she still trembled with apprehension. When she dared to move, she crept cautiously to both doors and locked them. No frightful vision could steal upon her unaware. What the poor victim up-stairs might be suffering was not as much to her as her own terror. Then she began to think. Why had Aunt Hannah gone to her room? Had she suspected her absence?

She had left her lamp burning, but she had shut the door, she was quite certain. She would not allow her, Bessie, a moment alone with Roy. But if she should be ill a long while — up-stairs, there would have to be a servant, and Bessie would take the head of the house.

After all, she might as well marry Roy. In all this while she had not seemed to attract any one's attention. And at the Deanes' there had been young men coming in nearly every evening. Here it was really out of the way. Of course it would be nice to go to the city if she knew just what to do; but Roy would not consent, and she had no money to experiment with. But to go on this way —

Would Roy never come back? She kept glancing furtively at the door, almost expecting Aunt Hannah to order her to open it at once. She began to cry again, from very loneliness as she sat crouching there, not daring to stir. There was a constriction in her throat that almost strangled her. And it seemed as if it must be morning when the sound of wagon wheels broke the awesome stillness.

She sprang up and unfastened both doors. Roy and Mrs. Austen came in together.

"Oh, you poor child! what a dreadful accident!" Then Mrs. Austen glanced around.

"She is up-stairs," explained Roy. Then he

lighted another lamp and led the way. Bessie followed, every pulse throbbing with indefinable apprehension.

The long figure lay on the bed, just as he had tenderly deposited it there. "Oh, heaven grant she may not be dead!" he cried in sharp sorrow.

"Has she been alone all this time and nothing done?" glancing at Bessie.

"We did not know what could be done for her. Sometimes inexperience hinders more than it helps," he said in excuse.

Mrs. Austen opened the blanket, then folded it again, while a shudder ran over her.

"I don't suppose we can do anything but just wait," she said hopelessly as she dropped into a chair.

Bessie lighted a candle and went through to her own room. There was a bracket against the wall on which she usually placed her lamp, as her dressing-table, as she always called the befur-belowed stand, was generally full of knick-knacks. A little way from it was an engraving in a celluloid frame, and then the window curtain. The lamp chimney was broken. The curtain, the picture, and the drapery of the table were burned to cinders. An untoward gust of wind from the window might have done the mischief, or the sudden opening of the door creating a draught.

Her bed was blackened, the quilt partly burned, the room was full of the odor of smothered flames.

Yes, if Aunt Hannah had staid in her own room instead of prying about. With all her horror and dread, Bessie was not specially moved to pity, since she felt underneath it all Aunt Hannah's motive. The table, too, was one of her aversions. Bessie had brought with her numberless little gifts with which she had adorned her bare room. The picture-frame had been especially cherished.

"You had better come down-stairs," Royal Palmer said, looking in. Then he added, in a low, solemn tone: "She is not dead. Mrs. Austen thinks she must have inhaled the flames. Oh, when will the doctor come!"

Dead! Bessie had not thought of such an ending. She stood horrified.

"Oh, she will get well again. She is so strong —"

"How could it have happened?"

"I think she heard us talking and came in here. She must have done something. The lamp is on the table and the chimney broken. I left it on the bracket. Oh, why are people so suspicious!"

He took her hand and led her down-stairs. "You had better take the lounge and get some rest," he said, in so grave a tone that it sounded

cold. Then he opened the door, stood a moment listening in silence, and passed out to pace restlessly up and down until the doctor came.

Being forewarned, Doctor Bevans brought a satchel of useful articles. Miss Gage was still unconscious. Mrs. Austen had looked up some clothing, for the nightdress had been burned to shreds. Her hair at the edge of her forehead was badly scorched, her face and chest had suffered severely; but the greatest danger was from inhaling the flames and smoke, and both had reacted upon the brain.

She moaned a little as they moved her, but took no note of the voices.

"It is a very grave matter," said the doctor. "You will want a good nurse, and Mrs. Ostrom came home a day or two ago. The burns will heal, but the greatest danger is from within. Did she give no alarm? How did it all happen?"

They went over to Bessie's room. The most probable solution was that she had heard the lamp chimney break, and had gone over, to find the curtain and picture-frame ablaze, and tried to put it out without giving any alarm, being almost at once strangled by the smoke. Yet the blaze had been extinguished easily, and it seemed as if it ought not to have brought about such terrible consequences.

Doctor Bevans remained until morning, but there was little change in the patient. Palmer went down-stairs, to find Bessie asleep on the lounge. He threw a shawl over her and stirred the fire, for the September morning was coming in chilly. No, the relationship in this case did not count for much, and he sighed. But if Bessie should be her aunt's heir, she would have enough to make a new start in life,—something that would suit her better than living at Westhorpe.

She roused when the doctor went away. Mr. Palmer had made some coffee, and she arranged a tempting breakfast, studying him furtively meanwhile. Surely she could not be to blame.

About nine, Mrs. Ostrom came, and Mrs. Austen went home. Then neighbors and friends dropped in with kindly sympathy and ready offers of help. It was a strange, exciting day. Jane Mason staid at night, and she and Bessie took the room Miss Helen had occupied. Bessie was curiously awe-stricken, and it stood her in the stead of deeper emotion. Her frightened eyes appealed to Roy with something beyond pity, yet not love, as he had come to consider the divine passion.

Miss Gage died without recovering consciousness. Mrs. Ostrom was one of the kindly, help-

ful women with a pleasant nature, and she felt really sorry for Bessie, who seemed stunned by the sad affair. The funeral was a large one, for Miss Gage had been held in general esteem.

That very evening lawyer Ralston came over with the will. But it had been made several years before. He questioned Palmer as to whether she had expressed any desire to alter it after her niece came, wondering a little that it had not been done.

"We never dreamed of her dying," answered Roy. "I do not suppose she thought about it at all. You see she has had a very busy summer."

With the exception of several gifts to friends her few thousands went to different charities in which she had been interested.

"Of course she knew nothing about Bessie then," said Mrs. Ostrom, "but it leaves the poor child in an awkward position, without a penny. I am sorry it doesn't go to her. Hasn't she some other relatives?"

"Not that I know of," returned Palmer. Had fate consigned her to him? "You will remain with us awhile?" to Mrs. Ostrom.

"If you desire it — yes. She is too young and inexperienced to keep house, and besides —"

Mrs. Ostrom did not finish the sentence. But Royal Palmer knew she could not remain unless he married her.

Bessie was bitterly disappointed at the will. She threw herself upon Roy's sympathies. She had no friend but him, and it would have taken a harder heart than his to resist her in her sorrow. She felt that he really ought to marry her, and he accepted what seemed a direct interposition of fate, and announced his intention to Mrs. Ostrom, who did not seem at all surprised.

There had not been much real love-making. It seemed the only course to Palmer, and Bessie accepted without being at all exigent. She had not loved Aunt Hannah, though she was shocked at her death. It seemed in a curious way to Bessie—she did not like to say a judgment—but a result of opposing an event that had been marked out by Providence. If Aunt Hannah had accepted and resigned herself to a conclusion so eminently proper, the accident might never have happened.

She hated the sombreness of mourning, but it would not do to defy the opinion of Westhorpe. She was married in a plain white gown, in the old parlor. So the rose had bloomed for both funeral and wedding. Roy took her away on a little journey, but she felt she did not dare plead for any dissipations. They stopped a night in New York, and she wondered if they could find Thirza Rolfe.

"Some other time we will look her up," was the quiet, decisive reply. Somehow he did not want

to see Thirza just yet. There had been an ideal manliness in his mind, and he had not lived up to it. He had not meant his sympathy for Bessie to be construed into love. He had begun to look upon her as a little sister thrown on his sympathy by a turn of fate; but she had taken up the only idea possible to her narrow mind and her longing for liberty—marriage. His tenderness prefigured that, of course, he would have loved her openly before, but for Aunt Hannah; and then these two women had infected him with their nonsensical ideas; but he would soon be trained out of them, and make just the sort of indulgent husband she wanted.

She would have liked to surprise Thirza with her husband, and have her tell the news to Miss Otis. They would remain friends, for a while at least; yet she doubted if the Otis relatives would approve altogether. But she did not dare insist, and she acquiesced sweetly, simply biding her time with an obstinate faith.

She ventured, on her return, to discuss some kind of reception.

"But you are in deep mourning," he answered, rather surprised, "and Aunt Hannah has always been such a good friend to me that I feel almost as if I had lost a relative. Then," hesitating, while a little crease settled between his eyes, "you know so few people in Westhorpe."

"That is the very reason I should be introduced into my new position," and Bessie flushed with vexation. "No one really understood why I was almost like a servant in the summer. I think Aunt Hannah delighted to mortify me, and I had been educated and trained for society. But for Mr. Deane's misfortune we should no doubt have had a summer at some fashionable place, and I should have married very well indeed."

She tossed her head with a touch of injured dignity, then added: "You cannot put me in my proper place too soon."

He made no reply, but that night consulted Mrs. Ostrom, who looked surprised.

"I don't think I would do it," she said. "You might send out cards, and people would call by degrees. Aunt Hannah's awful death has given everybody a shock, you see, and it would make a talk. I would wait awhile."

CHAPTER IX

A WOMAN AT HOME

It was so utterly delightful to get a place she could call her own home, Thirza Rolfe thought. "I must have been born for an old maid," she ruminated, as she was unpacking and setting to rights the boxes that had been sent from the storage. A pretty flat with a long parlor, bay-windowed in the front, a room between, lighted by the air shaft, a back room of good dimensions with range and boiler, two hall rooms, and bath. Miss LeClear had only two trunks, a table, and some pictures; Miss Prentice, some antique parlor furniture and a bedroom suit, beside her piano. They made a list of things to be bought, and each elected what she would buy. The floors were matted all through. Thirza supplied some pretty rugs that she had acquired at bargains. She took the middle room, as she was likely to do considerable work at home, and this had a closet in which she could stow away a great many articles. The others would be out a good deal.

The housekeeping would be shared between

them. Each one had kept herself in a "furnished room," and took meals in or out, as it happened. In the late spring, when they had talked over this plan and made their calculations, they had been surprised at the greater amount of comfort and pleasure they would have for the money.

"As long as we agree," said Miss LeClear, laughingly. "We will try it for a year, anyhow. It will give one a curiously settled feeling, almost like the first year of marriage."

"Why the first year, merely?"

"Because, when you are very much in love, you think it will last forever."

"And doesn't it in most cases?" asked Miss Prentice.

"Does it? How many marriage bonds would hold together more than a year and a day, if either party were free to go? How many do, as it is? But where you must stay, you fight awhile with him and with yourself, and then accept, if the chain doesn't break easily, or if you think it wisdom not to break it. You see a woman can't go out at once and step into something to earn her living. Perhaps if she could, there would be more separations. It is an ignoble factor in matrimony. But when we are able to care for ourselves, we are not so wild to rush at the first chance that offers. To come back to my text: We shall be the more

patient and the less exacting because we can go, even before our year is up, if we find it very hard to get along with each other. But for our own credit's sake we will be sure to weather through the showers and blasts of a year. Girls, I am not sure but this will be an excellent preparation for matrimony. We shall have some of the sharp corners rounded off. We shall also have learned to find judicious fault with muddy coffee, burnt toast, steak cooked too much or too little, and can meet the tyrant man on his own ground."

"I am sorry there are no galleries to applaud," declared Miss Prentice. "After my varied experiences, I have come to the conclusion that I could live with almost any one. I should like a choice, to be sure;" with an arch little gleam in her face that seemed to waver and flash like the sun having a tilt with summer cloud-drifts.

"We must settle our belongings, and we can take up our arguments later on," added Thirza, and to work they went with a will. There was not much spare time in their busy lives, but they managed in the course of a fortnight to look as if they had lived there forever, Miss LeClear said, and on the strength of this she invited in some of the younger newspaper men and her friend Mrs. Brade, and straightway had a symposium. There was music and some very excellent singing,

a few poems read, several capital stories told, a dainty and not extravagant little supper, and they all enjoyed themselves to the brim. It was some time after this when they had really settled down to work, even Thirza was at her table trying the effect of various points for an illustration, that her own little hall bell sounded. She had sent her address to Miss Brooke's care for Miss Otis, and was awaiting the result with a little curiosity, as well as interest, well aware that even friendship might look different through city eyes. But it was Helen Otis, very stylish indeed, in her autumnal browns, with dashes of soft dark red. Her smile was reassuring.

"Oh, how delightful you are!" she exclaimed, looking around eagerly. "I was afraid to come too soon. That flood of sunshine!"

"Yes, we have it all the morning, thank heaven. It inspires you to begin with sunshine. Later on your interest carries you through; and now lay aside your wrap, and let us have a good, long chat."

"But you were busy —"

"Not so busy but that I can devote some time to you. And tell me about your aunts."

Thirza seated her friend in the pretty willow armchair, now adorned with bright silken cushions, and placed a footstool within reach.

"Yes, you are lovely. And this handful of fire in the grate makes the atmosphere absolutely beguiling. If I don't answer your question at once, I shall forget. Aunt Margaret is very well. Aunt Essie is certainly failing. But for that—" Miss Otis paused abruptly. There was a little awkward silence of a moment or two.

"I half envy you," declared the guest. "Thirza, why couldn't the fates have given you to me for a sister? I am so alone."

"You are at home?" ventured Thirza.

"In my father's house, yes. But it is so different from any plan or dream. It is all handsome and in good taste, and there is no fault to be found with Mrs. Otis, except that I wish she had remained Miss Carew—that we had never met her, indeed. She has crowded me out of my place. A man may love a child and a woman, but he cannot love two women unless they are own mother and daughter. And I had counted so much on papa. I can't seem to understand," and there was a sort of entreaty in her face as if she besought Thirza to solve the difficulty. "He wrote such charming letters, even after he had known her. I do suppose he was engaged then;" and her voice dropped to pathetic regret.

"She is—fond of him?" It was a delicate question, and Thirza colored.

"Fond of him? She adores him. You should see papa! And I have an invitation for you to come to dinner, for I want you to know him. He is charming. If she couldn't make him happy, I would hate her, and she does; so happy he really doesn't need any addition to his felicity. She has had him all summer and has studied every little point. She's not fulsome or officious. I can't describe it, but her manner absolutely fascinates me where he is concerned, it is so delicate, so anticipative. How can she tell just what will suit him? I find his moods change. She orders a house as if she had done it all her life. No; there is no fault to find; but I seem on the outside of it all."

The tears came in Helen's eyes, and her friend was deeply moved.

"It is only a brief while," she said brightly; "you and she have not had time to assimilate."

"Please don't misunderstand on one point. She is very sweet and gracious to me. I have two pretty rooms; she hasn't even crowded me upstairs. The appointments are really more expensive than hers. We are not millionnaires," and Helen smiled frankly. "Papa has bought the house, and it is in an excellent neighborhood. It is beautifully furnished. But we shall not keep a carriage or give swell parties, though we may have

afternoon teas and all that sort of thing. We have had two dainty little dinners already, the guests being friends of papa's. I'm not crowded out of one thing rightly mine, and she stands ready to give me any pleasure. But it is the love. He has only eyes for her. He almost forgets I am there. And it is so hard, when I had dreamed of being first."

Thirza could almost have smiled at the girl's jealous sense of loss. It was hard, and yet inevitable.

"They don't need me!" she cried with a regretful passion. "They never will again. Why, even papa can make a jest about my marrying, and that is all that is left," drearily. "Oh, Thirza, I have been thinking for days; I envy you and your friends. You have something of real interest. If I were a genius, which I am not, and I can understand how a poor girl who must work or starve can be doing second or third rate, but I would have no such excuse. If I am thrown on my own life, I must make a life of my own, not dawdle through tiresome days."

"Oh, there is plenty of work if you mean real work —" and Thirza suddenly checked herself. Were there not duties as well? Had she a right to advise this young soul until she knew better how matters really were with her?

A fine, ingenuous color suffused Helen's face, and her eyes kindled in a sort of protest.

"I can almost guess what you are going to say, but do not make any objections now. We have talked all summer about the high purposes of life, the right of a woman to follow out some bent or desire or aim, and not spend her days in useless dawdling. I did not quite like some of your theories at first; I will confess that frankly now. But you have made a life of work look attractive to me. Is it any disgrace to live out *my* best? Is there not something to me as well as to most women? Thirza, how did you learn that you had a genius?"

Thirza smiled with a vague sweetness. How had she come to take up work when marriage had been set so insistently before her? During that year at school, she had discovered not exactly the bent of her mind, for until then she had not cherished any particular desire, and thought of school-teaching. But one day the sense of knowledge came to her,—the trend of her imagination, for she could hardly call it genius.

"When the thought came to me, I went to work. If I could not have made it a success, I should have turned my attention to something else."

"I do a good many things well," said Helen, with the fine absence of personal vanity. "Perhaps, if I was poor, I could hit upon one that would earn me a living; but I have the far inward sense of not being a genius, and papa would object to anything beyond accomplishments. So I must be a modern, fashionable girl," and she sighed. "There is a 'tea' on Thursday, and then I shall be fairly in the swim. And now tell me what you are doing."

Thirza was glad to leave the other delicate subject. Helen pronounced the rooms charming, and spent such a long time over pictures and books that Thirza insisted upon her partaking of a dainty lunch, since the cold meat and fruit were right to her hand.

"It is so cosy and delightful that I quite envy the other women," she said, as she went away.

Thirza sat a long while afterward, lost in thought. She had not meant specially to influence Helen Otis. Her life was best for herself, and yet it did seem as if most women were better content in marriage. Surely the army of workers from necessity was large enough. One really had to push into the avenues of employment.

She put on her best black silk and her finest laces for the Otis dinner, though Helen had

promised they would have it all to themselves. Mrs. Otis was not like any of her vague expectations. A woman medium in size, in looks, with nothing especial to distinguish her except a serene sweetness and a large share of common sense, that grew upon you and soon convinced you of her sterling worth. She was delicate and intelligent, well bred rather than high bred, and it seemed to Thirza that she was "fulfilled of all womanliness." She was won almost against her will.

Mr. Otis had been detained and was a little late, apologizing courteously. A still handsome man, inclining now to stoutness, full of pleasant society courtesies, that oil the machinery of living if they have no deep underbreadth. He was deeply in love with his wife, it was plain to be seen, and Thirza realized how hard it was for his only daughter to be set aside, to be treated as a pretty kitten or plaything, as if she had not really outgrown childhood, when to every one else she was a dignified young woman. But Helen herself did not suspect that a year or so ago she had appealed to him in just this manner, and he had been too much engrossed in his new love to note the change. The added dignity on Helen's part held her aloof with a certain pride.

At their marriage, Mr. Otis had said: "A stepmother to a grown-up girl is an ungracious office, and of course Helen feels she could have kept my house and done everything for me, in the intervals of having lovers and getting married herself. It would have been too much to ask of any young girl. And I want companionship, not merely girlish prattle; a love to gladden my coming years, selfish fellow that I am, not something to give away just as I am becoming accustomed to it. But I can trust you to be patient with her. It will all come around right in time."

Mrs. Otis had not promised with her lips merely. She soon saw the cause of the inharmony that would never be patent to the world, for Helen was too proud to admit the slightest cause of disquiet. She resolved to win her step-daughter's love even if it should take years.

"Of course you hear from Westhorpe," Helen said, as Thirza was putting on her wraps and pinning her hat, while Helen hovered about her.

"Oh, yes; the new railroad progresses, and a large silk factory is to be taken out there, just across the river. I believe Mr. Kent is afraid of their setting up a rival town, my sister wrote."

And as Clara was occupied mostly with herself and John, she had said not a word about the

Palmers, as they had not come to the tragedy. Helen longed to ask, but did not. She clung curiously to Thirza, because she was a part of the summer's life—of something that would never come again. She ran in one morning during the next week. There was a curious lightness in her voice, a satisfaction in her whole air.

"I want to tell you what a wonderful impression you made upon Mrs. Otis. She considers you quite a heroine. And papa hopes you will have the good sense to keep out of the strong-minded ranks. He is so bitterly opposed to the emancipation of women that, you see, I have not had the courage to admit your bearing that way. He classes them all with a few he has happened to meet. Yet he is compelled to admit that business women are reliable. Oh, are you ill? You look so pale and distraught. Forgive my heedlessness!"

A letter lay on the table. Thirza's eyes went down to it, then up to Helen. "You will be sorry to hear," she began abruptly,— "I don't know that I can tell it. Read, here." She gave one of the sheets to Helen.

"Oh, how dreadful! Poor dear Aunt Hannah! I came to admire and appreciate her fully. If she was rather narrow according to later lights, she had so much good sense and kindness. And

that it should happen this way. 'Do you suppose it was Bessie's carelessness? I was interested in her at first, but she is vain and pretentious and has a strand of ingratitude.'

Helen shuddered, thinking of that last talk. "What will she do now?" she inquired, with a curious huskiness in her voice.

"This is what she has done, or what he has done. It is the best, perhaps the only step," — and she handed Helen another sheet.

"Do you mean — can you think it best for Royal Palmer?" Helen inquired, with rising indignation, that sent a warm color from forehead to chin. "Do you think he loved her?"

"Not in either your or my understanding of the word, perhaps. There are many kinds of love, it seems to me, and men make themselves more easily content than women. Royal Palmer is coming to have many outside interests, and yet they are all centred at Westhorpe. His wife ought to be content with the place; and I think Bessie will be, now that she can have the full ordering of everything. He will make a very indulgent husband. Any woman less rigidly honest than Aunt Hannah would have settled upon the marriage at once as a means of securing her half-sister's future."

"But any one could see that she was really

averse to it," returned Helen, decisively. "Aunt Hannah loved Royal Palmer like a son."

"The older people at Westhorpe could understand her lack of love for Bessie. Aunt Hannah could have married well, but she devoted herself to her father; and in his old age, one may say, he married Bessie's mother. They had a comfortable little home. Aunt Hannah had worked hard to keep everything straight and satisfactory, and at his death, a few years later, he left her only one hundred dollars. The new wife had run the place in debt, and it had to be sold. Everything else was left to Mrs. Gage. We could not expect Aunt Hannah to love her, when so many unfortunate occurrences lay between. Bessie is very young, and her education is of the most superficial kind, still —"

"And you think this fits her to be a wife to Mr. Palmer — you, Thirza, with your high ideals of marriage? You and he were such good friends!"

Helen looked at her in amazement and indignation. It startled Thirza. But there was no color in her face, no consciousness, though Thirza's breath came with a quick gasp.

"I have grown away from Westhorpe," she said, with a touch of embarrassment. "Perhaps I have grown away from the people as well. They seem out of my life. Yes, Roy and I have

been the best of friends. I think we always shall be; but I could not imagine myself taking a life like his, looking through his eyes at everything —”

“They are clear, fine eyes, and can look straight forward into the world. I did think you might come to help him.”

Thirza drew a long breath of relief. Oh, no, one brief summer could not change this proud girl's life, laid out on such different lines. It was no interest of her own, but because a curious girlish dream had been woven about her, Thirza. Yet, after all, she had not seen very much of Royal Palmer this summer. She could recall two or three incidents that seemed to indicate especial interest in Bessie Deane, but no especial interest in herself.

“I do not think he would need my help. He is sufficient for himself, in his own way, — a man's way. He is going to stir up Westhorpe. It has been a sleepy old town; pretty, too, with avenues of refinement and delicate social life, and by-streets of the old-fashioned folk, who love to put by money and add farm to farm, and think the ways of their fathers plenty good enough. It would stifle me for steady company. But I am sorry you do not consider Bessie suitable or noble enough, or the kind of girl Palmer could mould to

his liking. I am beginning to think a good many girls ought to be married real young, while adoration is fresh, and nature yielding, pliable, adaptive."

"What becomes of your perfect marriage then, your ideal loving?"

"That is for older and more experienced people. So far I have not found a great many," rather drily. "Yet I suppose we are not the most correct judges of what is required to make other people happy. I have simply taken up the life I like best for myself. There are no other claims on me. Mother is much happier with my sister Clara. Yet my sister and my sister-in-law do not see why I could not be content in dividing my time between them, tending children, mending clothes, gossiping with neighbors, and the inane nothings of country life."

"But I think there is a good deal of intelligence in Westhorpe. I was really surprised."

"Yes—among the Avenue people, as I said," laughingly. "The lawyers and the clergy do make an attractive circle. But so many of them go away after the fall session of Court. Summer is by far the best and most golden season in Westhorpe. And the artists who sometimes drop down upon us add their mite. But I have summered and wintered, both;" with a dainty little nod.

Did Thirza Rolfe seem different here, with a sort of hard strand in her nature? Helen did not like her as well at this moment as she had from their first meeting. It was the first cross-current in a delightful friendship.

"I must go and take the sad news to Aunt Margaret," she said. "Miss Gage will have a sincere mourner in her."

"She will not soon be forgotten. It seems strangely mysterious, as well as sad." Then she rose and took Helen's hand and glanced appealingly into her eyes.

"Maybe I haven't judged rightly," she said, with an almost contrite eagerness. "You saw more of Bessie Deane than I did. Only what would have become of the poor girl?"

"He was very generous."

Helen Otis went her way and talked it all over with Aunt Margaret, who sorrowed first and then thought the marriage a very proper step. The young girl made no protest here. But her whole soul went out in a strange sympathy toward Royal Palmer. She was not in love with him, but she did desire better things for him, and she had a stubborn faith that he was worthy of better things, that he was quite worthy of Thirza Rolfe, if she did disdain him.

Was business and earning one's living going to

make women less sympathetic? She had been mysteriously roused to attempt something worthy of an intelligent human being. Yet at the very outset she was hampered by a curious factor in the case. She had no need of a struggle with the world. If she did anything, she should want to be a genius and reach the larger, finer heights. Still there were women who did not discover their true capabilities until long after youth had passed, and they had come to the ripeness of years. She hated to think there was only one aim and end to her life,—marriage.

There seemed a great many engagements, however. There were circles and circles in society. Mrs. Otis was not importunate for admittance into any special one, but her husband's society prestige opened many doors to her. She had some delightful friends of her own, and they could afford to be on the borderland and select judiciously. It was soon understood that she and Mr. Otis would be happy to welcome any friend on every Thursday evening. They came to be very delightful informal receptions where people of intelligence met for a half-hour's chat on current events, and discussed the newest music, the best plays, the pictures that were attracting attention, the books that were making a stir in the world.

One evening Miss Prentice and Thirza came at

Helen's urgent entreaty. Miss Prentice was a very fine pianist and taught music, and her share of the entertainment was some exquisite playing. Thirza met a member of a prominent publishing house and had a fascinating talk on illustrative art. Presently Mr. Otis drifted round to her. She was all brightness and vivacity.

"I am anxious to see your third partner," Mr. Otis said, with a smile. "You have quite bewitched my little girl with your housekeeping and all that. But don't spoil her with your new theories of independence. I want her to marry and have a happy individual life, a real home. Is that treason to you new women?" and he smiled.

"I hope I shall never object to any true marriage," Thirza said gravely. "I shall never even deny a woman's need of loving, and that home where love is kept alight on the home altar will always be my ideal. I have a great pity for those who neglect it and let it go out; but how many false lights are started that soon burn out to gray ashes!"

"True. One needs care and thought." He was so happy in his new venture that he took great credit to himself.

Helen's life was full of interest, she soon found, even if she did make faint protests now and then. It certainly was not all wasted time, and she did

enjoy the many pleasures. But she kept admirers at a distance with a fine sort of reserve.

Thirza heard from Westhorpe occasionally. Clara had small interest in any one beside her own flock, though she did now and then mention the work going on across the river. Seth's infrequent notes ran on one theme — if he had some money. He supposed she was making it straight along, while he was hampered on every side. Laura was poorly, and matters were generally discouraging.

CHAPTER X

A HUSBAND AND WIFE

BESSIE PALMER was cross and disappointed. She had felt quite sure she could twist Roy "around her finger," as she phrased it. He had been so easily coaxed at first. But that was for a ribbon, or a pleasure, or standing between her and some stricture of Aunt Hannah's. She could have the ribbon now; she was even indulged in the pony phaeton; but daring as she might be in some things, she was timid about driving. She had come to be uneasy under Mrs. Ostrom's keen eyes, and wanted her house to herself, so Mrs. Ostrom soon went. There had followed a frightful reign of incompetency that was enough to make Aunt Hannah turn in her grave. There were times when even Bessie wished her back.

Palmer had seen a fine opportunity for opening a saw-mill, and seized it at once, since the plans for the silk-mill were under way. Out here there was not so great a likelihood of strikes and disturbance. Since it would be across the river, quite at the southern end, there could not be so much

objection. In fact, there was plenty of assistance, and as the spring opened, Westhorpe seemed to awaken from its lethargy and rouse itself to the march of improvements. Royal Palmer became one of the moving spirits. But he was busy every moment of the time. Up and off while Bessie was still dreaming on her pillow. Dinners were such movable feasts, sometimes hardly worthy of the name, and Roy often took his with a plain country woman across the river, where he was sure of decent cooking. All the evening there were people coming in to talk business, or letters to write, and Bessie felt herself shamefully neglected.

A wiser woman might have made friends, but Bessie was still a child in many things. She wanted the eager, frolicsome young people, she wanted to dance and sing, to have a good time with laughter and merriment, but she soon learned to her great dismay that she had shut herself out of these delights by her marriage. There seemed nothing else to do then, but her haste had brought bitter fruit, for she could not be a giddy young girl, free to go and come. In six months she laid off her mourning, fancying that and the coming of spring would change the sombre aspect. She ventured now and then to drive by herself, but she never felt quite safe. To be sure, there were people glad to accept her favors, but they were

not the kind she desired. There had been calls, and she had returned them. Then the acquaintance seemed to languish. They had gone out to tea, but it was mostly among the elder people. She longed to give some kind of party and bid half of Westhorpe to it. If she only had some friend to come and stay with her who really carried weight. Would Thirza Rolfe be back in the summer, she wondered.

"We must have a good housekeeper, Bessie," Roy said one evening, looking up from his account book, where he had been putting down long lines of figures. "I shall have to take in some of the men, the foreman and several others. It would be too much care for you."

She raised her head listlessly, and gave a little frown.

"Workmen?" she asked indifferently.

"Well, yes," with a half-smile.

"Oh, Roy, couldn't we have some boarders, too? Not poky old women, like those Brookes, but some one young and entertaining? I'm so lonesome!" and the old piteous sound touched her voice.

"Yes, child; I begin to realize that this is no sort of life for you." He studied her with secret sympathy.

"No, it isn't, Roy." She came and snuggled in

his lap like a kitten. "Could not we let some one take the house and go up in town to board?"

"It would be very inconvenient, you see. Sam is needed here on the farm, and over to the mill, and in half a dozen places at once, it seems to me; and there would not be any room for boarders if the men came."

"I'm just miserable, Roy. I don't have any pleasure."

"There's the piano, and the pony carriage."

"Do you suppose I want to play everlastingly to myself? And if a friend would go driving with me—but I don't want the old frumps and some one with a sick baby. I hate charity work!"

He looked down at the baby face, drawn with pettishness. The soft golden hair was in pretty disorder, the mouth was red and pleading in spite of the frown. He bent over and kissed her.

"Bessie," he said regretfully, "I ought not to have married you. I am worlds too old for you—not in years exactly, but in most things. Then I am a busy man and care so little for parties."

It seemed to him he had grown much more serious since Aunt Hannah's death. She had been so brisk and alert with commonplace cheerfulness.

"Well, why did you?" Bessie cried wilfully.

"I thought you loved me. And it seemed the best thing to do then."

"But you are so different. You were always bright and full of talk and plans last summer, and taking Miss Otis out to every pretty place, as if you were in love with her. I do believe you were, a little. She tried hard enough to make you."

"Bessie!" His voice was unconsciously stern. "Do you not remember they were paying for the drives and the attention? I take the railroad directors out, the mill proprietors. I even point out advantages to them." His tone was a little dry and harsh. "And as for Miss Otis—I dare say she has forgotten about Westhorpe and all of us."

"But she did like you, and she tried to keep you from caring about me. She was always putting high ideas in your mind, and you were so much nicer without them. Not that she would have married you —"

"No, she would not have married me," taking up Bessie's sentence quickly. "Such a thought never entered her mind, nor mine. She belongs to a different world, to a world of culture and refinement. So we can dismiss her."

"But you did like her. You took more trouble for her than you do for me. Why do you

not drive out with me on pleasant afternoons? Oh, if people would only come in and play and sing and talk! It's so stupid!"

She gave a little stretch and yawn that deepened her expression of dissatisfaction, her indifference. He felt it in every pulse of his being. She was a soft little bundle, and he could feel her pulses beating gently as if she had not been deeply moved, but just a little fretted. He remembered the night a year ago he had brought her in his arms and placed her in the old chair over yonder, to Aunt Hannah's great disgust. She had stirred all his pity and sympathy then and many a time since. But he knew when he married her that he did not love her as it was possible for him to love. He did believe he would grow to love her through her very fondness for him. But he understood, now, that her nature had no depth, no real affection, though she could be jealous enough. He was not yet thirty. There was before him ten of the most ardent years of a man's life. Perhaps at forty love would cease to exert such a sway, such a longing. He could honestly say that he had tried at first to awaken a deeper regard. There had been very little real love-making, the silly fondness he despised. Must all their years pass like this?

He made no moan that he had so thrown away

his life. Not to have done it would have exposed Bessie to gossip. But what could he do for her if she would not be lifted up by his love?

"Bessie" — his voice had a strange solemnity in it — "we have not done so very well so far. It has been a great mistake. But other people have outlived mistakes and come to a true understanding. Can't we begin again? If you would try a little! You are so young. There are many things for you to learn. I will help you to the best of my ability —"

"I hate preaching!" and Bessie sat up with a touch of resolution, "and I wish I wasn't married. I'd like to have years of good times. But one can't have them without money. Thirza Rolfe and some other women keep house and do quite as they like, and there's so much going on in a great city. Roy, people do get divorced —"

"Bessie!" The sternness of his face and voice frightened her, and dropping her head on his breast she began to cry.

"My dear Bessie, we must try how near together we can bring our lives. We must remember what we have promised each other — first of all, to love. And we both said of our own free will — 'till death do us part.'"

He felt her shudder at the mention of death.

"Bessie, shall we try?"

"You're awfully good, Roy." She reached up and kissed him. "And now I am going to bed, and you can go back to your books."

That was all. He would not detain her. Could any one get down to the depths of her heart? For since they were husband and wife, it was clearly their duty to try — his duty. He had not been doing it, he admitted with sorrow.

The interest in the business was gone. The figures blurred before his eyes. He rose and walked out in the mild spring night. There was no moon, but the stars shone on a flawless field of blue. The air was sweet with a hundred fragrances. He went around to the great porch, and sat on the step. Was it last summer, or in some strange dream? He could see Helen Otis swinging slowly in the hammock, like a blessed ghost. "She liked you." The soft wind seemed to repeat Bessie's words. She had roused in him a vague ideal of what a man might be. Would he have made Bessie a better husband without it?

She and Thirza — were they together now and then, working at the curious problem of life? Was it true she had not wanted him to marry Bessie? Well, she had been clear sighted. What would some one else have done that terrible night? For to become Bessie's banker and let her try the world for herself, it seemed to him, would be open-

ing the path to destruction. But he did believe she loved him. That was his excuse for the ruin they both had wrought. And he knew now that love, tender, enduring, was not in her. No great joy, no pain, no trial or suffering, could bring it to light.

After making some inquiries he found a trusty housekeeper, and she took her orders from him. Bessie was eager to see the newcomers. Both were with families, middle-aged, and full of business. They did not promise much entertainment.

One day, Bessie stopped in John Kent's store to make a few purchases. "I suppose your sister-in-law, Miss Rolfe, will be back in the summer?" she said half-inquiringly.

"Well — no. Mis' Kent was quite lotting on it. You see grandma ain't smart, and Seth's wife's pretty ailin'. Seems only natural that Thirzy'd want to be with her own folks, but her time's all took up with that picture business. An' now she's goin' out to Californy with some folks — why, that girl 'twas to your house last summer — the young one —"

"Miss Otis" — as he looked inquiringly at her.

"Miss Somebody. She wrote to my wife. The girl's pa and ma are goin', an' a newspaper woman she's been livin' with, to write some letters. Now you wouldn't think writing letters for papers would

pay any much," and Kent gave an amused chuckle. "Seems to me any fiddlin' thing makes money nowadays, when honest labor don't. No, we shan't see Thirzy this summer."

Bessie turned away disappointed. She, too, had been remembering snatches of talk these two young women had indulged in. The road to womanly independence was not so dreadfully hedged about, if one could only get into certain fields. To go to California just to write letters, or to sketch pictures — well, she couldn't do either, she admitted with a sigh. But there were women living apart from their husbands, lecturing, singing, doing a great many things. She half wished she had not married Royal Palmer. How could she have known he was going to be so engrossed with business? Why, he sat around last summer and talked, or listened to Thirza Rolfe reading! True, it seemed stupid to her. She wouldn't mind reading stories aloud, or bits of fun, or singing comic songs, but she hated business. If it would only make Roy rich enough to go and live in a city where there were fine stores and theatres, and plenty of entertainment!

Palmer looked at his life with great seriousness, almost alarm. He had seen people in Westhorpe mismated, he thought, but they did not fly out in angry despair. Should he despise himself for his

lack of wisdom, for his pity that had been so easily roused? That would not better his life. No searching self-disquisition would mend matters now.

He had opened his soul to another's wounding through very tenderness. He was too thoroughly honest to avoid the consequence of his ill-judged act. There must be an uncomplaining acceptance of the result.

He felt, in his secret communings, that if he had allowed himself to love a woman like Helen Otis secretly, hopelessly, even, it might have saved him. He had put all thoughts of a deeper liking for her out of his mind. She was so far at the other end of the plane. Nothing in his simple, commonplace life would attract that kind of a woman. He had hardly counted on her being such friends with Thirza. Yet she had given a new impulse to his thoughts. He felt the subtle change in himself. Was it not a change that would take him farther away from Bessie? Then how much right had he to it?

He could not go down to Bessie's level. Her virtues and graces were only on the surface. Could he raise her a little?

He went to work in tender, heartfelt earnest. He took her to drive with him, but she rarely found anything to interest herself when he talked

of the future. She was not cross, but bored. Now and then a man paid her some especial attention which served to give her a feeling of elation.

Westhorpe became curiously gay this summer. The hotels overflowed. The private houses were pushed to their utmost. In the late afternoon the principal street was gay with promenaders. The park was dotted with picturesque groups; women loitering or reading under the shade of the old trees; the stages were kept on the go with parties exploring every pretty nook, and taking picnic teas or gypsy lunches.

It was not only the women. Business received a great boom as well. Even John Kent, when he had secured several large orders, wasn't quite so sure the town was going to ruin. Over the river it was like a busy hive. The mill was going up rapidly. Rows of cottages were making their appearance, with a little plot of ground on one side for a garden.

"It will make the women and children more content. A few vegetables and flowers that they can tend themselves, and a pen of chickens, will lead them to forget the friends they left behind in the city. And the absence of saloons will soon tell on the morale of the workmen."

The mill superintendent had addressed these re-

marks to a group of men who were eagerly discussing plans, and had hardly taken in the full import of the addition to their town. They had been laying out part of the property and counting up prospective values.

Roy had all his life enjoyed seeing people happy. It was Bessie's evident unhappiness that had won the large share of his sympathy. Twenty or thirty families suddenly transplanted from all their old associations; some most undesirable, he knew, but why not make the new environment more attractive? There had been a certain feeling about these people coming in, among the old residents who rarely considered the world's advancement. He was proud of his native town, and the cavillers must see that he had undertaken no retrograde movement. He was at once interested from this standpoint, and threw himself into the work with a new and broadening energy; and his soul unconsciously turned to the two women who had discussed philanthropic movements with such zest last summer.

It was hopeless to think of engaging Bessie in the advancement of her fellow-creatures, in the future welfare of the town. Miss Brinsley and two or three other broad-minded young women were away. Palmer suddenly realized what the higher education was to a woman. Still he tried

to devote some of his time to Bessie. She understood that it was not quite the thing to frequent hotel society without her husband's occasional protection. There were card-parties, evening dances, then an amateur theatrical entertainment for a children's hospital in a neighboring city.

Bessie was in great demand. There was a pretty, daring soubrette in the play, who had to sing some popular songs. Bessie really distanced her competitors. She was in her element. Roy knew she was taking part in it. He was glad to have her roused out of her listless ways, but she said nothing of the play until a few evenings before it was to be given.

"I don't like the part for you," Roy said, with disapproval in both face and voice.

"There wasn't any one else who could do it well," she answered, with undisguised elation. "Mrs. Lowndes thought of sending to New York for a cousin who is a real actress, but she found she had gone to take some one's place who is ill, and would be engaged the week of the play. It isn't a high-up part, to be sure, but much of the real interest depends on it, and it just suits me. I know I shall not have a bit of stage fright."

She looked so coaxing and confident, not only of her own powers, but her ability to convince her

husband, that any real argument would be useless. He felt helpless, yet he said: "Are you quite sure no one else could be found? You are so young and inexperienced."

"But I have played in no end of charades, and recited, and we used to go to the theatre often. You see, most of it depends on the confidence in one's self."

Palmer gave a little sigh.

The entertainment was in the town hall, and so great was the interest that the place was packed in spite of the warmth of the summer night. Bessie's faith in herself had not been misplaced. The real interest rather lagged until she appeared. There was a little coquettish by-play with two admirers, and one of her songs came in this first scene. The audience applauded enthusiastically. Her second song met with such a rapturous ovation that she had to sing an encore.

"She should have been an actress," Palmer said sadly to himself. Never had he seen her to such an advantage, or so brilliant. But—his wife! He shrank from the thought. He hated to meet the eyes of his friends and neighbors.

Mrs. Lowndes said the same thing to Mrs. Palmer. "I was so awfully afraid at first it wouldn't be a success. Such audiences are generally lenient; they know you are working for

sweet charity's sake. But you started up every one with an electric shock. I can't thank you enough, my dear Mrs. Palmer. And your encore was charming. You were a brilliant success, and I want Violet Fair to see you. Now, if you were not married! And your husband is such a grave sort of fellow. Why do you bright, volatile girls always marry that way?" and Mrs. Lowndes gave a rather thin, brilliant laugh.

Bessie flushed. Ah, if she had not married that way! She could almost blame Roy for accepting the fiat so readily.

Others congratulated her as well. "You really made it the principal part," said some one, "and your singing was capital." Bessie drank in the praises with a secret exultation.

There was a supper afterwards at the hotel, meant to be kept quite select, but there were many friends and admirers. Palmer was gravely devoted to his wife, for her own sake, for Bessie's delight and exuberant spirits touched the point of overflow.

It was past midnight when they reached home. Roy went to put out his horse. Bessie pirouetted around the room, watching herself in the mirror, and rehearsing some bits of the play. Ah, how delightful it had been! "If I were not married," she said in a sharp, dissatisfied tone. How could

she ever have thought it such a great thing to marry Royal Palmer!

"You don't look a bit tired or sleepy!" he exclaimed, studying her in a sort of surprise. He was weary enough; for he had risen at five and been in a rush all day.

"I am not. Oh, Roy," and she threw her arms around his neck, standing on tiptoe, raising her laughing eyes to his face, "don't look so solemn! Tell me you liked the little play. Other people thought it splendid! And you ought to praise me, when nearly every one else has."

"The play was well done. But I didn't quite like my wife to be the heroine of the occasion," he said in a tone so soft it was hardly dispraise.

"You are a fussy old fellow, Roy. Aunt Hannah spoiled you. And you forget how young I am!"

Yes, she ought to be among gay young people. She ought to be single, with a girl's life before her. Oh, if she had been *his* half-sister instead of Aunt Hannah's. He was sorry for her, condemned to live half a life only. But he could not understand in his honest-thinking fashion why she should not try to make the best of her place here. Individuals did have to fit themselves to certain states and positions. And when one had accepted of one's free will —

Perhaps he was too easily satisfied. But then he had most of the things he wanted in this life, or at least a prospect of them. His tastes were simple, yet not ignoble. He liked the strong, high side of education and culture. He was too loyal to admit that Bessie's strength lay chiefly in obstinacy.

CHAPTER XI

A DANGEROUS FRIEND

MRS. LOWNDES was delighted to avail herself of Bessie's pony phaeton and company for the remaining week of the season. She had been twice married and was but five and thirty. A divorce had ended her first brief episode. There might have been a second one, but Mr. Lowndes died suddenly, without a will, and as there was a large amount of personal property besides the real estate, she managed to make a very good settlement between the law and the heirs. She still clung to the grays and lavenders of half-mourning, as she knew it gave her a more distinguished air. She cultivated some of the fads of the day, her latest one being the emancipation of women from the tyrant man. She was quite a captivating talker, and she had sufficient tact to study the temper of the people with whom she was incidentally cast, which gave her an air not only of experience, but good breeding.

She was not long in understanding Bessie's dissatisfactions. Here was another girl too young to

know her own mind, who had been really entrapped into marrying a man for a home. Palmer, no doubt, thought it a noble thing to almost force the refuge upon her in her perplexity, but Bessie was pretty, and no doubt he had been really fascinated with her. That Bessie had used her arts and thrown herself upon his sympathies, was not at all consistent with Mrs. Lowndes' professed idea of women.

Bessie was delighted to listen to the talk about Violet Fair, a rising actress. "She has been a wonderful success," said Mrs. Lowndes, with some pride. "She's not beautiful, either, but she makes up well, and nowadays high tragedy and all that is out of date, except for just a few. We never thought she had much voice, either, but she could dance, and she took minor parts in a variety company; and one night she sung a song. It's queer how a thing takes! She confessed that she was as much surprised as anybody at the stunning success. That's slang; but no other word quite expresses it. She had been waiting for weeks to put the thing in. Of course she might have made the manager tearing mad if she failed, but she was bound not to fail. Then her way was clear, you know. And she's just gone on and up until she can make her own terms, and heaps of money in the bargain. People are always wanting fun, you

know; and if you were not married, I should beg her to take you up. I do so want her to see you. But then it would be of no use," and Mrs. Lowndes sighed.

Bessie sighed too. "You see I didn't know then whether I could do anything that I really liked. If Aunt Hannah had left me her money — it wasn't much, to be sure, but I should have gone back to the city and tried my luck. I hate country places like this, and a farm is dreadful! I almost died last winter of loneliness."

"You must come and make me a visit in the winter. I often take a furnished flat for a few months. One wants a home feeling now and then; at least, we women do. Men think they do, but it is only a sort of theory. They want a lounging-place, where they can read their paper and doze in a way they would be ashamed to at a club."

"And if Mr. Palmer enjoyed going out where it was bright and lively! But he doesn't dance, and he really isn't fond of society, except where there are men to talk about town improvements and what the legislature is doing, and Congress and all that;" and Bessie's pretty face gloomed over.

"There are men who ought never to marry. I don't mean anything derogatory to the men, my

dear; understand that; but they never trouble themselves to understand woman, to study her in every way. If they support her, they think their duty done. I don't see why such men want to marry. It is a great mistake, a great injury to the woman who might have done something more satisfactory."

"Yes," returned Bessie, feeling herself a deeply injured woman. If Roy had not offered to marry her, she was sure, now, she should have gone to the city and found something to do.

No matter on what subject they began, the talk always drifted round to this. Mrs. Lowndes knew she was fanning Mrs. Palmer's discontent with her life, but she salved her conscience with the fact that it was an unwise marriage, and it would be an untruth to deny it. So many people married unfortunately. Perhaps in the new order of things women would be wiser; would realize that their lives were given for some purpose, not merely to be wrested from its rightful longings by man's power over them.

She had heard some such talk last summer, Bessie thought. She was not sufficiently critical, nor had she the breadth of mind, to discriminate between Mrs. Lowndes' liberty for a married woman, and a single woman's right to refuse marriage if she chose. She wanted to be free and

prosperous enough to do as she liked. But Mrs. Lowndes was quite too wary to counsel a separation.

At the last moment Violet Fair found she could not come. "Don't, pray, induce any one to leave a good home for the uncertainties of the stage," she wrote. "There are hosts of stage-struck girls now who are on the verge of starvation."

Mrs. Lowndes did not repeat this good advice. There was no use in paining the poor child when she might never see her again. She parted from her with a great deal of tenderness and half wondered how it would do to propose to Mr. Palmer that his wife should accompany her on some autumnal tour. But a very tempting invitation came to her that settled the matter.

Other people were leaving Westhorpe as well. The chief hotels closed for the winter. The park, the lawns, and the promenades began to wear a deserted aspect. Roy understood this, and devoted more time to Bessie, taking her out on his business drives.

"But it is so cold and stupid to sit there alone while you are talking," she said, with extreme dissatisfaction. "I believe I would rather stay at home."

And as it grew colder in the autumn he ceased to ask her. She drove by herself, and now and

then found a friend to take out. Then she played and sang and danced for amusement. She acted parts of plays that she recalled, or improvised them to suit herself. But it was the crowd and the admiration she wanted, that she had a secret consciousness she could win.

Just before the holidays, business matters took Palmer to the city. Bessie could have danced with delight.

"We have never taken a real wedding journey," he said, pleased at her happiness. He had begun to realize that the life was much worse for her than for him. "We will have a gay time, and you shall go to the theatre as often as you like."

Three months ago she would have clasped her arms around his neck and indulged in endearing epithets, if they had no real meaning. Now she had a touch of dignity that rather amused him, as she said in a pointed tone: "A year and more seems a long while to wait for such an event. Still, I am glad to have it even now."

"Bessie, you know all the reasons. It has been hard and dull for you, but another summer I shall be more at liberty. And you could have gone to Niagara."

"Oh, with those stupid Bowens! And I don't really care for Niagara. I want to go where there are hosts of people and one has a good time.

And I shall find some old friends in New York, I know. It seems an age since I came here; a long, dull, wretched age!"

He kissed her, but made no further argument. It seemed to him that there were women with whom he might plead for love, but Bessie was only a sweet, wilful, undeveloped child. What power could rouse her? Did he really love her, or was he only trying? Oh, he had not reached the divine inspiration.

She was quite her joyous, eager self on the journey, and delighted to be at an hotel in her own dear city.

"We must hunt up Thirza," he said. "Perhaps she will look after you a little when I am busy."

"As if I did not know my way about!" she laughed. "Why, I feel utterly and entirely at home, quite, as if Westhorpe was a horrid dream. Oh, Roy, are you not rich enough to live in the city? I wouldn't mind ever such a little place, and we wouldn't need horses or carriages, and we could be economical." She looked up so pleadingly that she did move him a little. If he could give her back her freedom!

"I am afraid I should mind the little place, and the lack of green fields, the animals, and all the rich, sweet fragrances."

"There is the beautiful park," she pouted. "We might live in the city in the winter."

He smiled, but made no reply. Perhaps she loved the city just as he loved Westhorpe. She was glancing eagerly over the theatrical advertisements. The name of Violet Fair caught her eye.

"Oh," she cried eagerly, "we must go to the Bijou to-night. There is some one I want to see."

"But are you not too tired?"

"Tired! No! You think me some decrepit old woman." She did not look very old. Her eyes were shining, and her cheeks had a pretty color.

"As you like," he replied. "I shall be at your service most of the time. You must have a grand holiday."

"You are real good, Roy," she said, a little pricked in her conscience. Then she bent over and kissed him. "Will you go for the tickets?"

"Won't to-morrow night do as well?" They were hardly settled.

"No, no! Why can't you do a thing in the right and the graceful way, Roy? You think you want to make me happy, but it must always be in your way. I have a way as well, and it is the best way to me."

He put on his hat, and went out without an-

other word. Some one bright and gay and young could make Bessie very happy. Yes, he must be rich, too. Bessie had no idea of the value of money. Well, she should have a delightful time to make up for the infelicities.

The house was well filled. The play was a light society comedy, with songs, dances, and brilliant scenic effects. Bessie was enchanted. She kept fancying herself on the stage. Miss Fair was tall and slim, but certainly not handsome, she decided, yet there was a charm in every movement; a little too pronounced, perhaps, or was it because she, Bessie, had been living a rather strait-laced life for the last year and a half?

She was so bright and happy that night that Palmer's spirits rose strangely. She had been too dull. Life was too narrow for her. He must try some way to broaden it in her fashion. Would Thirza know what would be best? He wanted some advice from a woman. He felt ignorant, lost. If he could only rouse a real love in Bessie's soul! They were married, and he longed to make the best of it.

Bessie was like a bird let loose. She haunted shops and stores; she looked covetously at the tempting array in windows; she shopped with a half-hesitation, all her desires seemed so extravagant. They took lunch in a stylish restaurant, and

Bessie ordered delicacies that had been out of reach in her girlhood.

Quite late in the afternoon, he mentioned Miss Rolfe again.

"I am too tired to go," Bessie said brusquely. She caught the look of disappointment on his face, and felt she had been ungracious.

"Suppose you put me in a car, and you go," she proposed, in a softer tone. "Then you can tell if she really cares to see me. You know she only took me on sufferance. And I'll get rested up for to-night. I am tired, truly."

"Oh, we can wait until to-morrow."

But the "to-morrow" was busy enough when it merged in to-day. Bessie had a slight headache and would not go out in the afternoon. She was still lying on the bed when Mrs. Lowndes' card was sent up to her.

"My dear child!" cried Mrs. Lowndes, as Bessie entered the reception room. "I just received your note this morning, and I had a dozen engagements. I've fulfilled part of them, and then I ran off. I was so glad to hear that you were here. I never reached the city myself until December, but a friend had taken a double suite of rooms, and I am quite settled. I meant to write to you as soon as I could get through with the press of other matters. I hope you have come for a good long stay! And

you saw Violet? She's made a great hit this winter. You look charming. You must come to me to-morrow. It is my afternoon. And now tell me what you have been doing all the autumn."

"Growing more and more stupid, and hating Westhorpe," returned Bessie, sharply.

"And the mills and things?"

"The mill is in running order. There are hosts of new people, such as they are. But there's nothing to amuse one. I think some day I shall run away."

"You are a naughty child. And your husband?"

"He has found time to be quite devoted," Bessie answered, with a laugh.

That was a better aspect of affairs, Mrs. Lowndes thought. She had been a little startled at the half-incoherent note. She was not at all ready to take the onus of any woman's ill-considered step. So now they could talk quite at their ease. Mrs. Lowndes had been here and there. She had met some very entertaining people; women of course. Women were coming to the fore all the time. There was so much work to be done, and this work had so many amusing phases, it did not bore Bessie in the least. There was a woman's meeting at eleven to-morrow in Mrs. Broderick's parlor. Bessie would like the fun, she was sure, the ideas were so various and striking. "Then you must

come home with me and have luncheon and a rest. I have sent out invitations for four Fridays, two for this month and two late in January; so it is fortunate you came this week."

They talked on until Mrs. Lowndes bethought herself of another engagement. Palmer had made some business calls, balancing his desire to see Thirza with a half-defined fear of the propriety of calling on her alone. Bessie, he felt, had no real desire to go. He halted a few moments before the neat but unpretentious apartment house. A lot of women trying to make a home had seemed a rather ridiculous idea to him, as to John Kent.

He summoned courage presently and threaded his way through halls and stairs, and tapped lightly at her door. Thirza opened it herself, so there was no chance to retreat.

"Oh!" with a flush of pleasure illuminating her face, "my dear old friend, how welcome you are! It is indeed a treat to see some one from Westhorpe. And here is a surprise as well. We were talking of you not five minutes ago."

Palmer flushed, but still held her hand unconsciously, as they nearly crossed the room. A tall, beautiful woman rose; yes, she was that now. The girlish hauteur had been toned to a sweet and gracious dignity. There was a softened light in her eyes that bespoke womanly tenderness, and

the curves about the mouth and chin were finer, nobler. She smiled with charming friendliness.

"Miss Otis! This is an unexpected pleasure. I hardly had the courage to present myself to Miss Rolfe, lest my rural aspect and demeanor might be quite humiliating to my friends."

Thirza laughed softly, and glanced him over.

No, he had not degenerated; his marriage had not been a bad thing for him, she fancied at the moment.

"Sit down and tell me all about Westhorpe. And Mrs. Palmer —"

"I left her at the hotel, too tired for another step. She is on her native heath—pavement, in this instance," and he smiled. "We were prevented in calling yesterday, but she insisted I should delay it no longer. And as my time is a good deal taken up with business —"

"Surely you need not apologize for remembering me, the friend of a lifetime," returned Thirza, with an aspect as cordial as her words. "I confess my delight at once. Indeed, you have occupied a good share of my thoughts, I must admit, I have heard such conflicting accounts of you. At first you were bent on ruining Westhorpe with your railroad and improvements. And now the railroad connection is what the town has needed for years, and as the mill and the businesses of vari-

ous kinds are advancing the material interests of the place, I think you are quite forgiven. Or is it the ingratitude of towns?"

"You would hardly know us. You missed us altogether this summer."

"Yes; I had a certain inward assurance that you would not need me. And Westhorpe was unusually gay, my sister wrote. Are you in the conspiracy of the new hotel?"

"Oh, no. I am not the head and front of all offending. Elm Avenue has been straightened and made wider at the upper end, and here the new hotel is to stand. We are waking out of our Rip Van Winkle nap."

"Are you quite sure you will not spoil the beautiful old town? We ought to have some places full of dreamy comfort when life presses too hard."

"The old part will be left undisturbed. The new part will stretch out on the opposite side of the river. Yes, I should be sorry to see any great change in those streets that have grown up with the sacredness of homes and memories centuries old. But the world forges on, and we must join the procession or drop into stupor and decay. There will be enough left for you to recognize the place, unless you should stay away too long. But I half envied you your journey on the other side

of our great continent. It is one of the hopes in store for me. You and Miss Otis must have enjoyed it to the full."

They talked it over, Helen Otis taking her share in the conversation. Palmer was keenly interested, and Helen was surprised at the knowledge he displayed, that must have been gleaned from close reading. Then they came back to Westhorpe, and he was amazed when Thirza sprang up lightly and declared they had lost count of time and were in evening twilight.

The room looked charmingly comfortable in the soft glow of the shaded lamp, and the burner overhead that sent its gleams farther around. Thirza had been at work on a water-color that stood on the easel. Palmer glanced about. What gave it the indescribable charm? The soft coloring, the air of ease and restfulness, a bowl of deep red roses on a small table, and a straggling cluster of golden-hearted Marguerites with all their feathery green growing out of a slim tall vase, suggested summer. A woman's room, he said to himself, yet there were women and women. The restful aspect touched him. Was it the ideal he sometimes dreamed over?

"I have stayed unconscionably," he exclaimed, "and even now, I hate to go away; there are so many things left unsaid."

"But you will come again," rejoined Thirza, cordially, "and bring Mrs. Palmer. I would call if I knew when to find her in."

"Which is, of course, extremely uncertain. Yes, I shall be glad to bring her."

He went out amid the hurrying throng, with the picture of the room and the two women in their noble sweetness before his eyes. It had hardly dimmed when he entered his apartment at the hotel. Bessie was putting the finishing touches to her dinner toilette.

"Oh, I have so much to tell you!" she cried, with joyous animation. "Mrs. Lowndes has been here. You remember she was at Westhorpe last summer? And I am going out with her all day to-morrow. It's her reception in the afternoon, and Saturday she is to take me to a matinee, and she thinks I can see Violet Fair afterward."

So she was very little interested in Thirza. Mrs. Lowndes knew two women who had exhibited at the Academy, and had casually met Miss Otis.

What charm lured him again to Thirza Rolfe's the next afternoon? He had a presentiment she would be out; but she was not only in, to his great gratification, but alone.

They took up the incidents that had been so eventful to him, — Aunt Hannah's death and his mar-

riage. He touched lightly on the latter event, but Thirza was startled by a sudden knowledge that for a moment overwhelmed her. Certainly Bessie had *not* been the election of his heart. Thirza wondered if he had developed any? She recalled the almost disagreement she and Helen Otis had fallen into at the first tidings of his marriage. He said nothing about his domestic affairs, but he was eagerly descriptive concerning the improvements.

"We were deeply disappointed last summer at not seeing you. Bessie had her own pony and phaeton, though so many of the real Westhorpe people were away. Still it was quite gay," and he sighed a little, in a manner that touched her to the quick.

"I went away on quite a short notice, and it had a profitable side as well. One of my compeers," smiling a little, "had an excellent business offer and wanted me to take the illustrations. Then Miss Esther Brooke, who had been ailing some time, died. Helen was devoted to her and quite worn out. Mrs. Otis proposed that they should join us when we reached Lower California, and it was such a delightful summer."

Her eyes were lustrous now with all the charming memories.

"Yet I hate to have you give up Westhorpe," he

said, with a lingering intonation that moved her keenly.

"Oh, I shall not give it up altogether. Do not the loves of early youth come back in old age? When I want to retire from the active, busy world, I may buy me a cottage in its sylvan shades — that is, if there are any left," glancing up archly.

"I for one do not want to wait for old age. Though one could hardly connect you with age," and he looked admiringly at the proud eager woman. Why had he not loved her? Why, indeed, except that he had fancied she would some day belong to Bernard Ward? "You and Miss Otis are splendid examples of womankind. Has she found any —" He paused and flushed, but Thirza knew the word was not lovers.

"I was so afraid at first that she would be restless and dissatisfied and make some mistake in her eagerness to have a life of her very own, to make amends for the disappointment about her father. But Mrs. Otis is one of the lovely wise women who had to care for herself so many years, that home and love came to have a sacredness, a desirableness. I suppose Mr. Otis chose her because he loved her, and he is very much in love," laughing with soft approval; "but if he had been looking for a friend for his daughter, he could not have made a wiser selection. Mrs. Otis insisted

that Miss Brooke should come to them for a while, and now they are one family, one charming family. It is my ideal home. I want you to see it and them. Miss Brooke will be very glad to meet you and Bessie."

"You have not gone clear over—" Palmer paused and gave a half-embarrassed smile. "Mrs. Kent is much worried about you," changing the sentence suddenly, but not its trend.

Thirza flushed. "Clear over on the woman question," she appended. "It has a great many sides, a great many issues, and is too large to be settled in one generation, perhaps. The part that has interested me is a woman's right to be respected in earning her living along the lines for which she is best fitted. I dare say I could spend my time between Clara and Seth, and make myself womanly useful. My little income would have clothed me. Would I have done justice to myself? God gave me a certain talent, and I am using it, perhaps to quite as good a purpose as if I had made a hasty, mistaken marriage."

"But are you going to forswear matrimony? Thirza, just such women as you are needed to prove to the world what a perfect, intelligent, well-administered home might be like."

"If I should marry, it will be intelligently." She blushed, and half-smiled. "You admit then that

I have not lost the art of home-making. Last year there were three women of us here, happy, busy, not despising social life, sometimes a little frivolous perhaps, at others deep in interests outside of our own lives, learning all the time how much real work there was in the world, sympathizing with our struggling sisters, helping them to a truer standpoint, earning our own living, and realizing better, perhaps, what living costs. I shall have to admit that it has not been a bar to matrimony, for one of our number has succumbed to its blandishments. She and her husband are splendidly mated and have gone on their wedding journey around the world. That she is not a helpless, frivolous being will prove no detriment, I think. Yet at eighteen she was tempted to marry a rather brilliant young man, who has turned out both a drunkard and a thief. Would a life with him have made her more heroic? When a woman feels she need not depend upon matrimony as the only resource, there will be a better race of women and wives."

"You haven't gone very far in the new doctrines," he commented drily, to keep from crying out at the truth of her words.

She gave an amused smile, unconscious of the turmoil within the man, and said lightly:—

"Oh, I go to suffrage meetings now and then. I even listen to the tremendous charges made

against the tyrant man. But if women gladly accept the chain and spend their best energies in pampering the man they have set over them, I do not see that they have a just cause for complaint. Or if a woman accepts a home and support, merely, surely she has some duties on her side."

"It is you splendid women who keep out of matrimony," he said, as if impelled.

He rose abruptly. He would like to ask some advice of this clear-eyed, large-hearted woman. He *had* been used to a small round where women were concerned. Could this great mistake of his life be mended?

CHAPTER XII

THE PITY OF IT

THE fortnight passed rapidly. Even Palmer dreaded to snap the fascinating charm. He had prevailed upon Bessie to come to a luncheon at Miss Rolfe's, but she was so engrossed with Mrs. Lowndes' circle that she was not specially interested. Then he had gone with Thirza to call upon Miss Brooke and met Mrs. Otis, whom he found a very charming woman. Miss Otis and Thirza had called upon Mrs. Palmer. Bessie, with her natural adaptiveness, had attained a certain elegance in this brief while.

Neither of the girls discussed the marriage. Thirza felt she had really underrated Palmer. Or had he, like herself, been roused to make the best of his abilities? That was quite possible. Womanlike, she had considered only Bessie's welfare in the marriage, and she knew now it was one more of the great mistakes of life, for Bessie was simply frivolous and selfish. She showed it too plainly.

He came in, the morning of his departure, rather worried and uncertain, she thought.

"Bessie has not finished her visit," he said, in a somewhat troubled tone. "Mrs. Lowndes insists upon her spending a fortnight with her. Thirza—if you would call a time or two! The holidays will be much gayer here, and Bessie was brought up in the city, you know. It seems really cruel to refuse her."

"I will do whatever I can," Thirza answered, startled, and intuitively apprehending the mistake.

"I am compelled to return. I have stayed longer than I ought, and I shall be very much engrossed with some matters at home. But Westhorpe is dull and lonesome for her."

"Even I have been insensible to its charms," she returned lightly, by way of comfort.

He had meant to ask another favor, that she would write a note or two; but it seemed like a watch set upon his wife, and he did trust her. No, it was not possible to propose such a thing.

"I have many things to thank you for," he said in a strained, hurried tone, with his farewell. Yet he wished more than once he had exerted a husband's authority and brought Bessie home. He did not quite approve of Mrs. Lowndes, and her "set" was not at all select. Perhaps it could not be, taking in lecturers, musicians, literary aspirants, and theatrical people.

One or two brief notes came from Bessie, in

which she said Thirza had called and she had gone to tea and a little musicale at Miss Rolfe's, who had quite signalized herself with some Christmas work. A delay and then an announcement that her stay would be prolonged another week.

Palmer gave Bessie the full week's grace, and then went to the city for her, carrying her off to a hotel, where they had a stormy time indeed. Bessie had been listening to more than one discussion on the tyranny of husbands, and had formulated some very decided opinions. But she found Palmer was the master in that he was the moneyed partner to the contract. She had been quite lavish, and she knew that money was the important part of life—her life.

"If she had some of her own," she kept thinking in sullen silence during the homeward journey. Oh, why had she been so eager to marry Palmer?

How wretchedly plain the house looked after all the light and glare and gay furnishings! It was cold and stormy for a week, and Bessie refused all overtures of comfort and tenderness. Her only consolation was writing long letters to Mrs. Lowndes, which she mailed herself, with a half-guilty conscience, for she felt her trials were largely exaggerated. Day and night she dreamed of freedom. Women were often

divorced. Why should Roy care to keep her, when she had said she hated him? Once she had accused him of compelling her to marry him.

He looked straight into her eyes, that had been so pleading that unfortunate night.

"Bessie, you know that is not true, and we have sadly realized that Aunt Hannah's judgment would have been much wiser for both of us."

Bessie shuddered. Why must he recall that horrible time! What else could she have done, unless he had been a brother and generous enough to let her try life for herself? For she knew now she might be a very fair success on the stage. It was not genius alone or hard work that won the plaudits. Ah, how enticing the life looked! And if a woman had a right to live out the best of her aims and beliefs; if, having made a mistake, she could in some manner cast it behind her and start afresh—Ah, how tempting that shallow approval appeared!

She tried to discuss the possibility with her husband. She used the arguments that had seemed so plausible to her, so convincing. This was not the life for her. She could not make him happy. Why, then, should she be condemned to make him miserable?

"But you have not really tried, Bessie, child; do make one earnest effort. Will you not take a little interest in our home and make it cheerful? In the spring, we will furnish anew, and if there are any alterations you would like—"

"I hate the loneliness out here. I hate house-keeping!" she said vehemently.

"But you don't keep house." They had two servants, and Bessie always took breakfast in her own room. Since her return, she had evinced no real interest. "It wouldn't be so bad boarding at one of the hotels. The loneliness kills me. I never was fitted for such a life. I knew I should be wretched the moment I entered this place. Oh, why did fate send me here!"

He remembered the soft arms that had been wound around his neck that first night, and the cheek that had brushed against his. She seemed so sweet and delicate in her helplessness. And she was longing to try the hard, hurrying, heartless world, where one misstep ruined a life! No, he could not let her go. Whether for good or ill he had taken her into his keeping, and he was answerable for her. If he could not make her happy, she would at least be safe.

When she had exhausted her arguments, which were something of a shock to him, she fell into a dreary, sullen silence. Each day her chain grew

heavier. Why had she not a right to snap it? Ah, if she had some money of her very own!

The spring came on, and, to Palmer, Westhorpe had never seemed so lovely, nor the old farm-house so dear. Yet he wondered if he might not make the concession for Bessie's sake. The house needed painting and repairing, and if they went to a hotel for a month, it would be pleasanter. His business interests were increasing, and he was often engaged in the evening. Bessie would have some entertainment.

She rather brightened at the proposal. Then a letter came from Mrs. Lowndes that stirred the passionate longings of her nature. Violet Fair had married her manager. They were forming a company to visit the principal Western cities, and Miss Fair's experience enabled her to select those she was quite sure would be a success.

"If you were only single and really wanted to take up the life, it would be a chance out of a thousand for you," wrote Mrs. Lowndes. "Violet was so impressed with your grace, ease, and adaptability. She wouldn't give you any encouragement, because you were married, but she said only yesterday, 'I wish that pretty Mrs. Palmer wanted to try for a season. What a pity she is not a widow! I'd put her in the way of success at once.' Your forte is the stage, and it is a shame to be

buried alive in a humdrum country town. I think of going to California with a party who are to take up a crusade in behalf of women. It amuses me, and one likes fresh pastures now and then. So I cannot come to you, but you might come to me for a while."

A chance for her! The words haunted her night and day. That Violet Fair should admit that she might be a success! A feeling of elation thrilled through every nerve. She danced about the room with a delirious sort of joy, as if she already saw herself on the stage. Some one had said her dancing was a perfect poem. Did not the woman who could write a poem rush into print, long for publicity?

"Bessie," Palmer said that noon, "I find I must go away for several days. I have had an offer of a large lot of lumber that I would be very fortunate to get. I shall go as far as Detroit, as there is a little business there I must settle in person. Suppose you join me on a week's holiday," and he smiled persuasively. "I should not like to leave you here alone, and there would be the same objection to the hotel."

Bessie stood quite transfixed. "I should not go to the hotel alone," she answered rather sharply, from an excess of emotion, hard to control. If she might go to New York instead!

"I must start to-morrow," he continued. "It is a short notice —"

"And I should be alone a good deal, then. A business tour isn't very diverting to a woman."

"I should take some leisure. I thought you were longing for a change." He felt hurt at her objections.

"I'll consider," she returned, with cold indifference.

If he could only understand what would make her happy. She puzzled him sorely. He had need of a good deal of patience.

Bessie sat in a study all the afternoon. More than once she had contemplated the step that would ensure a separation. Why should she spend her years with an uncongenial man? He had met every argument with the stubborn fact of duty. They were married. They must go on and find the true level. If she went away, if she made all her plans before he could possibly become aware of them, and if she refused utterly to share his life henceforth! The adventurous side of the matter appealed to her.

When he came home to supper, rather late, she was wrapped up in a shawl, lying on the bed. She did not want to talk, but just think over her daring plot. And the best of it would be that if

she was unsuccessful, she could return without confessing the real object of her journey.

"No," she said pettishly, in answer to his inquiries, "she was not ill. She did not even have a headache. She simply wanted to be alone and quiet."

He was used to her whims and changes, and he was not surprised when she told him the next morning she had decided not to accompany him. She would get along very well. There were enough people in the house for safety.

So Royal Palmer went his way, rather dispirited, it must be confessed. He could understand a woman like Thirza; or, were women different when one came to see them daily? But he would not torment her by unanswerable questions. He gave her a tender good-bye kiss.

Palmer was delayed a little. He had received but one note from Bessie; still he recalled the fact that she had not been much of a correspondent while in New York. From the station he went over to the post-office, and one letter in his mail startled him. He knew Bessie's girlish, irregular hand at a glance. The post-mark told him another fact. Still, he did not open it until he returned home.

"There's a pile of letters on your table," announced Jane, after the first greeting. "One from Mrs. Palmer."

"Yes, and another came to-day." Then he passed through to the sitting-room. The feeling was strong upon him that Bessie had decided her own destiny. He opened several of the business letters first, and then held hers for many minutes in his fingers.

She had decided. There was some illogical reasoning, but she admitted frankly that she was miserable and dissatisfied, that she knew now she had never loved him, and that she never could be happy in Westhorpe. She had seen the manager of a theatrical company, and had been accepted, and no argument or persuasions would induce her to give up her plans. She begged him not to make any effort to see her, and said they were soon to go away, that her first appearance would be made in distant cities, but she was not afraid of failure. He could take any course he chose in regard to the future.

No tenderness, no regret, no lingering touch of sympathy! He bowed his head that she could be so heartless.

The second note announced they were to leave on the tenth. Why, that was to-day! She was flying from the infelicities of her short life, thinking every mile between them was an augury of safety. A sad half-smile crossed his face. Now that the step was taken, further opposition would be useless. He accepted the grim facts.

When he went out to supper, he simply said: "Mrs. Palmer will not be home this week." There was no one save the farm hands with them now, so he ate his meal in silence and spent the evening as he had spent so many, immersed in business. But the house seemed strangely solitary. In a certain fashion he found he had been very fond of her, that she was a large interest in his life.

That Mrs. Palmer should be away several weeks created no comment. That she should go West with some friends was no surprise, though after a while there came some furtive whispers. But only one person knew the truth, and that was Bernard Ward. Royal had gone to him for comfort in his perplexity.

"I should simply do nothing," said Ward. "She is not worthy of any man's solicitude. I can't understand how you came to marry her when you had known a woman like Thirza Rolfe."

"But I never thought—" and he stared at Ward with perplexed astonishment.

"Oh, she would not have married—either of us," bitterly. "But having known her it seems as if one must despise weakness and frivolity ever afterward. Such women mean to hold themselves regally above ordinary men. Either we give up our dreams of home and happiness, or make a wreck with some lesser prize and find it delusion."

"You cared for her; I always knew that. There was nothing between us but ordinary friendship, now high and fine, but under no circumstances would it ripen into love. Surely you did not allow such a fancy to mar any dream. Why, if you loved her —"

A tender, heartfelt light shone in Palmer's eyes. Always he had half suspected Ward.

"If I loved her, she would walk coolly over it. Women's demands increase with their power. Perhaps we have had it too long our own way. But in the main it was not altogether a bad way. It made some happy homes. And in the years to come we shall all miss the influence, I am thinking. When women come to live for the world and enjoy the turmoil and strife instead of the hidden sweetness of love and home, marriage is at a discount."

"You are unjust to her. If you could see her in that pretty room with her work about her, you would feel the womanliness of the picture. Surely, Ward, you can't object to any woman living up to the truest and noblest aims?"

"Aims of self-sufficiency. They want to stand quite alone. They are ashamed to accept the common lot of mankind, an ordinary man, an ordinary love. If the ideals of men of half a

century ago were foolish, weak, and lackadaisical, still there were some noble sweethearts and wives and mothers. But their ideal man must have the virtues of the angel Gabriel, and stand at the topmost round of everything. We cannot all be at the top, we may as well accept the fact. So we who are not consumed by mis-called ambition, cannot enter the lists for the modern woman who is able to make her home to her own liking."

"You are unduly bitter, Ward. And if you cared for Thirza —"

"Cared for her!" Ward interrupted vehemently. "I loved her six years ago, when I came here fresh from college with a young fellow's dreams of distinguishing himself. But you learn there is more talent in the world than you had suspected, and each man is striving for the same thing. Then came her legacy, her year at school, her knowledge of her own powers, — her genius, if you will. When she was here not quite two years ago, her very advance in everything startled me. I felt as if I had been wasting my life, vegetating. Yet I had done my duty thoroughly here; I had made some delightful friends; I had planned a lovely life with Thirza in it. But I half realized that she would disdain any ordinary round. I was dissatisfied.

I spurred myself up to some new pursuits and took my remaining degree. Last year I had two good offers to go away. One was in a new Western college. The crude and undrilled life did not suit me; the refinements of Westhorpe did. The other was in a thriving Western city as well, but I had a presentiment Thirza would not accept that life any sooner than this. I did not like the hurry and strain. I want a little leisure to enjoy what I have. I cannot resolve to spend all my years in a restless struggle for the high places. Then, you have been so engrossed with your own affairs, that you may not have heard our academy is to be remodelled and made a superior educational centre. You business people over the river are not going to have it all your own way. The Miners are to build a new wing and give it a partial endowment. After various wide experiences, Miss Miner has resolved to use her money in improving her native town."

"Yes, I had heard something about it, and Colonel Miner's interest as well."

"There are three elderly people with a good deal of money, and what is more to the point, some pride and public spirit, and I have accepted a position for the next three years and as much longer as I like. I might have more fame as a

college professor elsewhere, but this suits me and gives me salary enough to indulge many of my wishes. I can have a home, leisure. I can satisfy my whims," with a half-laugh, "read, study, even entertain friends," and he gave rather a sharp ending to his sentence.

Palmer looked at him with a curious intentness. Was that summer, when the four of them had been so much together, a hundred years ago, or in some other life? Bessie was a weak little shadow in it. He had known so little about himself then; he had grown so much since. Affairs of greater moment had been presented to him, and he had found himself able to grasp them. Life seemed to stand expectant; there was a fascinating richness in it. It was not the estimate of the hurrying, bustling, artificial regulations without; it was the two souls that might meet, blend, and work out between them a heavenly existence.

"Sometime I may go abroad, take a leisurely tour through Europe, not a mere six weeks' run. And, Roy, I must confess I was a little jealous in that old summer. I used to think Thirza might be won to something deeper than friendship with you."

"We were always friends. Are some women especially formed for friendship?" and his voice sank reflectively.

"A woman not formed for love would be an anomaly, a monstrosity," Ward subjoined, with some bitterness.

"I have known one intimately who is not formed for love, who never can be. Yet she has the winsome disguise, the apparent tenderness, and a certain seductive sweetness. Time disproves many things, or perhaps it is experience."

"And you care for Bessie?" Ward tried hard not to have the tone contemptuous.

"I have the same tender pity for her that I had in the beginning. I am afraid I had no definite ideas about love, except faithfulness and kindness. So I have made a grave mistake. To bring her back in some compulsory fashion would be of no avail."

"Let her have her fling. Your dream has come to an untimely end; mine will have no fruition. Let us find what we can in friendship," grasping Palmer's hand. "If women can be happy and satisfied with that, why not men? There is work for us both to do just here. Let us accept it."

Could the two souls, so evidently meant for each other, go through life and never learn the grand secret? Palmer would not believe it.

"Thanks for your proffer, as if I had not known it long ago," with a softened smile. "I shall take advantage of it. I have just awakened to the real

delights of knowledge, and at present my life must go on as it is."

But in his solitary moments there grew up another side to it. Two months later, Bessie wrote again. She had been a comparative success with all her inexperience. She had been born for an actress, and in a few years she would be quite independent. Even at present she could care for herself. Whenever he chose he could apply for a divorce and end their unlucky marriage.

The thought of freedom gave him a curious thrill. But he would make no undue haste. There was enough to occupy him at present. Yet there was a subtle mortification that Bessie should have taken up such a life, a variety actress, dependent upon the caprice of a frivolous public, to whom a turn in a catchy song, a bit of dancing, fun, laughter, youth, and a certain saucy prettiness were the chief ingredients. And he knew, now, that he could have sent her out to seek her fortune, and made her enough happier than he had by sacrificing his manhood's greatest hope. Yes, Ward was wiser not to put a slight on the face of love.

By May the road was in running order. It cut off a long detour between two important cities and opened up new places for settlement more advantageous, perhaps, than East Westhorpe. The old road had been laid out to reach some coal regions

without much thought of convenience to the towns.

Then another project was mooted that met with a cordial reception. This was the removal of a theological seminary from a location that had proven most unfortunate. An old estate with a rambling stone house had been bequeathed to the corporation. Westhorpe seemed a most advantageous place, in its refinement and quiet. Plans were made at once for an extensive alteration. The small community were quite delighted with the prospect, and some of the more substantial citizens came forward with generous subscriptions.

CHAPTER XIII

THE END OF ONE DREAM

MEANWHILE events were shaping some new problems for Thirza Rolfe's consideration. She had spent a busy and happy winter, she was even making money. Yet she found many of her fellow-beings unsuccessful, both men and women.

From Clara she heard the ordinary gossip of her native town. She wished occasionally that some one would write up the other side. Bessie Palmer's defection had no doubt been a nine-days wonder. At first little was known concerning it. The idea of a certain separation was generally accepted, and presently the fact leaked out that she had adopted the career of an actress. Her mother, every one remembered, had been a flighty, showy thing.

Thirza was intensely shocked. She had a haunting consciousness that she had in some sense helped the sacrifice in not seeing more clearly, in not taking a truer estimate of the man, in not counselling him in the path of that higher standard for which he was groping—as she saw now. Helen Otis had been keener eyed. Aunt Hannah's shrewd,

narrow wisdom had been truer than the theories on which she had rested her serene faith. She had found Bessie very trivial and to her uninteresting, she had not taken any pains to detach her from a dangerous clique. Could she have done anything? And she felt now that a really fine life had been wrenched out of its true orbit by a fatal step.

After Miss LeClear's defection she and Miss Prentice had drawn closer together. She was a broad-minded woman yet thoroughly upright. There had been a little talk of taking in a third, but they shrank from any inharmionious element. If Helen Otis had needed the place, but though she coveted it, there was no reasonable excuse. Mrs. Otis was the most charming of friends. And Mr. Otis had an insuperable objection to women entering the business arena unless from necessity.

"But if she should meet with misfortunes later on, she would be quite helpless without any training," ventured Helen one evening in a discussion.

"And every woman ought to know something that will provide her a living in case of need," Thirza said decisively.

"Your reasoning would be very good if there were no changes in the business world," replied Mr. Otis. "We will take, say, a woman who has taught school until she was twenty-four and then married. Ten years later, being left a widow and

needing to do something to support a family, she turns to her profession and finds it has outgrown her. The methods have changed, and she has had no opportunity to keep pace with them. Men go right along. They do not give up any business because they marry. Rather they strive to perfect themselves in order to obtain higher salaries. Even methods of music teaching, one of the accomplishments, change."

"I can answer for that," confessed Mrs. Otis, with a smile. "Every two or three years I found something new to learn."

"Miss Prentice is doing the same," said Thirza.

"There are a very few things that a woman can step out of and take up years afterward. That is a comforting yet fatal theory."

"But a great many young women are thrown on their own resources," protested Thirza.

"Yes. Let them do what they are best fitted for. But what I protest against is a girl who has a good home and some one to care for her taking up an industrial branch from an idea of so-called independence, or a thought that in years to come she may want to use it. She must necessarily displace a girl who has need of this very thing for a livelihood. She may have advantages for gaining and controlling employment that her poorer sister has not. She may even earn enough

to support two poorer women. She can afford then to spend the money in wasteful luxuries, or hoard it up. Instead, the father should be saving up for the daughter."

"But if she has a special genius?" asked Thirza.

"Then let her cultivate any real genius. Let her get all the higher education she can. Let her study the advancement of social life, of art, literature, history, and have something worth talking about. Let her take up Charity work in its broadest beneficence, but do not let her paint second or third rate pictures, or do poor needle-work to sell to her friends, thinking that she is nobly earning money for charities, while she wastes her own income on herself. There is a good deal of needed work in the world that must always evolve itself out of pure, high benevolence. Let the women of leisure do this in such a fashion that it shall crowd no poorer women out of the real working ranks. Let our young people marry and have simpler lives, though I am no advocate for improvident marriages, I must confess."

"But the women who do not marry, and have not fortunes —" laughed Thirza.

"Their more fortunate sisters must not interfere with their right to employment. But I think a happy and thoroughly enjoyable home is a woman's

noblest work. And, Miss Rolfe, I think you are a charming home-maker. I only wonder some man has not found it out."

"He did," confessed Thirza, blushing and laughing. "He is sharp and shrewd and bent on accumulation. He cares nothing for the refinements of life, for education, beyond the three R's. He is loud and aggressive. He has but one aim to his life,—to get money."

"Then you were wise not to marry him. But I think you can do better. I am old-fashioned enough to believe wedded life when rightly undertaken is the happiest of all states."

"You see," Helen said, half an hour later, as Thirza was putting on her wraps, "papa's panacea for all women is marriage. He will not allow them any real ambition outside of that. One could hardly blame Mrs. Otis for adopting his views. But I have a great, hungry desire that is not marriage."

"My dear girl, be patient. You are still so young," and she kissed her fondly.

She went slowly up-stairs to her own pretty, comfortable rooms. But during the ride, and even now, she was pondering the late discussion. She had a vague nervous feeling about Helen. The manifold charms of Mrs. Otis impressed her deeply. Had no one surmised in all the years before she met

Mr. Otis, that she possessed the divine gift of home-making? Clara had been married young; Seth's wife was still in her teens on her wedding day. Yet she thought if she were a man and compelled to live with either of these women, she would go crazy. Perhaps she was getting old maidish.

She opened the door softly. A tall, fine-looking man stood at the end of the mantelpiece, and Nina Prentice near him. The woman blushed scarlet; the man, noting it, smiled with a gleam of conscious pleasure. Between them both Thirza read the story.

Miss Prentice introduced them, but he soon took his departure.

"Thirza dear, do not think me deceitful above all women," Miss Prentice pleaded. "I told you once a fragment of a love story and a dispute that raged hotly, of a broken engagement, and the man's hasty marriage. That was five years ago. Last summer his wife died. I think he was punished sorely enough without any censure of mine, since I was equally to blame. But for her death, the notice of which came to me while you were planning your tour, I might have accompanied you. I confess I was too proud even to raise a finger. I should not belong to my sex if I had not wondered. To-day, the first opportunity

he has had to come East, he called on a mutual friend to inquire about me, and I was giving her daughter a music lesson. Afterward we went up to the Art Museum. To-night he came for his answer."

"And you will marry him?"

"I shall marry him," answered Nina Prentice. "I think we love each other more truly than five years ago. We are both wiser, better, really richer, for the separation and discipline. But you poor child —"

"With no one coming to woo," sang Thirza, laughingly.

"Do you remember what we discussed when we first came here? the possibility of a disagreement. None of us had any special predilection for matrimony. You were the youngest. We all had settled opinions, and a settled occupation — were really successful women. We have made a delightful home; it has been the envy of our compeers, who of course could do the same thing if they really set about it. Yet it has been basely invaded," and she laughed gaily, "and wrecked by the old, old story. I couldn't imagine Miss Le-Clear falling in love in that headlong fashion, yet she did. And I am the second traitor in the camp. My poor Thirza, what *will* you do? Place your affections upon some other women and find them unstable as a reed?"

She drew Thirza down on the sofa, keeping her arm fondly about the slim figure.

Thirza gave a tremulous sound, not quite a sigh.

"If you will come to California, you may still share my home. It is the best amends I can offer you for my recreancy. *He* is quite willing. He is very proud of women of genius and ability, having tried the other kind. His description of the pretty little thing suggested that Mrs. Palmer, only she, it seems, must have had some pluck to start out on an independent career. I shall constitute myself a rival to Miss Otis and bring all my powers of persuasion to bear upon you."

"I wish you could have heard Mr. Otis this evening. You certainly would win if he could have the casting vote."

"I can guess. I shall rise in his estimation. Will this be the fatal point in women's endeavor to create homes for themselves, this element of uncertainty, this sympathetic side of their nature, so open to attack from the wiles of man? But there were the Maids of Llangollen who kept the faith. Thirza, are you disgusted with me? Have I been too easily persuaded? I think now I have loved this man seven years, and for five years steadily have forgiven him. Four of the years have been very happy to me. But I *am* troubled about you. Come with us."

"You forget that I have some folks. My mother is growing rather feeble. No, I could not go away at present. I think I must visit Westhorpe this summer."

"I have a month's grace. But May is a tolerably long month, and one can do a good deal of talking in thirty-one days."

Thirza laughed brightly at that. But it was late, and both went to bed.

Thirza could not sleep. Her future seemed to have had an upheaval. She wanted a home, she was fond of all things that went to the making of it. She had a large social side to her nature, a generous side for the people she liked. But living alone did not look attractive. It seemed quite ridiculous that this experiment should last only two years. Changes like this would weary her. In spite of her courage, a touch of desolation crept over her.

Willis Barthman was a very exigent lover. He had said a month was all the time he could possibly spare from his business without great detriment, and a week of it had gone already. There was no need of any great parade. They could go to church some day just at the last —

But Miss Prentice found herself quite a centre of attraction. The Otis family were warmly interested. Gifts poured in upon her from pupils

and friends. And then she resolved to be married in her own home and have a dainty reception, a farewell.

Thirza liked the plan immensely. The two rooms were adorned with their best gear, but the flowers showered upon them hid nearly everything. Helen Otis was charming and helpful, and Mrs. Otis came to matronize the occasion. It was quite the event of the season in their circle. Mr. Barthman's fine presence won golden opinions.

He had warmly seconded his betrothed's wish that Thirza should at least spend a year or two with them to make amends for the despoiling of her own pretty home.

The marriage was in the presence of a few choice friends only, but the reception was thronged all the afternoon, even when the bride had said her good-bye and been whirled away to the station. Mrs. Otis insisted upon Thirza spending the night with them, but she declared she wanted to be alone and think.

Seth and Clara had been writing importunate letters. "Seth's wife was very poorly and it did seem as if Thirza might give them a few weeks—her own folks, too. Clara was having her house altered at last. Mother wasn't strong, and they did need her." She could always recall the night

after Nina's marriage. The rooms were heavy with the odor of flowers; it looked like a garden. She could not sleep, and she sat by the open window in a curiously expectant mood, as if with the dawn something would happen.

The only thing that did happen was making up her mind to give up her pleasant rooms of which she had grown so fond. It could never be the same with new people. She would go to Westhorpe for the summer. After that circumstances should guide her. But she had a stranded sort of feeling, as if somewhere she must begin life over again. There were other women in the world — perhaps some of them were longing as desperately as she to find the real clue through the labyrinth.

CHAPTER XIV

THE MAN'S NEED

"YOU'VE just come in time," declared John Kent as he met his wife's sister at the station. "Laury can't live through the day. Clara went over last night."

It was the middle of June, and Westhorpe was abloom with roses and syringa. There had been so much for Thirza to do. Her choicest belongings had gone to the care of the Otis household, the others had been boxed and stored. Business engagements had to be planned. Then she had promised in the coming autumn she would be the guest of Mrs. Otis for a month or two, while she was settling her future.

"We're all up in heaps and piles," as they drew near the house. Thirza shuddered at the confusion. A tall boy leaned on the gate; the rest of the fence had been taken down, and this looked queer standing.

"Mother's come home," he announced; "Aunt Laura's dead."

The unemotional tone shocked Thirza. He

gave a tug at his cap and a half nod. This was Jack, called so to distinguish him from his father.

"So you have come at last," and Mrs. Kent kissed her sister as if it was a seal of condemnation for her dilatoriness. "Poor Laura's gone, and she did so want to see you. Seth's about wild. What in the world he'll do! Mother Albert's there now. I had to come home. You see what a mess we're in."

Her mother had grown more than two years older, Thirza thought. Aunt Abby was more wrinkled and crooked; the children had grown, and all of them talked together. Clara was tired and cross and flung out bits of captiousness. By the time the supper table was cleared away and the children in bed, Thirza felt that a week must have elapsed since she left the city.

Her mother told her all the news in the evening. "Laura had consumption as much as anything. She always kept worrying for her baby, an' now she's gone to him, poor thing! And what Seth'll do I can't see. 'Pears to me he grows more an' more careless like, clear discouraged, I s'pose, with such luck. He's took up some money, and what he'll do about the farm I can't see. If I was a younger woman I'd take hold and help him, but I ain't very strong now, an' I don't know how Clara'd ever manage with the mending if I wa'n't here."

Thirza went out to the farm the next morning. Seth broke down when he saw her. He had aged unaccountably. Mrs. Albert and one of her married daughters were staying on until after the funeral. The little girls had gone back to their forlorn aspect, and Edith had forgotten Aunt Thirza, who had once roused her love.

"Seth ain't had a bit of management," declared Mrs. Albert, complainingly. "All poor Laura's money has been frittered away. Her grandmother might as well have divided it among *all* the girls, and some of it would have done good. 'Twas for her name, you know. And Seth raised money on a mor'gage, to pay up some debts and give Clara hers; and he doesn't seem to make a livin', let alone money. Our old house is sold, so I've a little money for my old age; but it is a shame about all of Laura's. Some one will have to come here, too. I can't stay. Mary's goin' in her new house, and I'm to have the ell part. I want my own home. So we shall be most of the summer settlin'. I don't see how he could afford a housekeeper. But Laura's folks have done their full share; and we ain't any on us rich, to say, though I've got enough to keep me without bein' beholden."

Thirza was glad when the melancholy rites were over and Mrs. Albert had gone home. But what was Seth to do?

"I couldn't even take the children to tide over," said Clara. "We've hardly a place for ourselves. I should feel it my duty to go there if I was single. I don't suppose you'll marry now, Thirza, if you haven't had chances in the city. You're quite getting along. And it does seem as if you might spare a month or two to your own kin in sorrow as well as to go pleasuring about. We haven't asked much of you. I must say I think you've had a pretty easy time."

"Have I asked anything of you, or mother, or Seth?" returned Thirza, with spirit. "I have been earning my own living."

"And spending your legacy!"

"What I have spent I have made good again. It seems to me I have the same right to my own life as you or Seth. Being single does not make any difference. You both chose to marry. I have the same right of choice."

"It *does* make a difference," declared Clara, illogically. "Old maids are expected to fill up the chinks, and have a little care for people in trouble."

"I am not old enough to be forced into any chink just yet," returned Thirza, with a touch of spirit. "Laura's sisters stand in the same position in regard to the children."

"They're not single. They have families of their own; and their first duty is to them."

There was no use arguing with Clara. A single woman, in her estimation, had no right to herself, but must be at every one's beck and call.

Seth's disconsolate pleading touched her. She had thought to spend the summer in Westhorpe.

"You do not understand," she said to her brother, and she felt the hopelessness of making him see through her eyes. "I have accepted a business life, and my whole heart is in it. I have made engagements that I must keep. It would be a great sacrifice to give them up for six months or a year. If I do remain, I must do my own work as well. I could only supervise. A working housekeeper might be less expense."

"But I'll do everything in my power, if you will only stay. I've never forgotten how smoothly things went that summer you were here, when Laura was ill. I've wanted you so this summer in all the trouble." Seth Rolfe wiped some tears out of his eyes. It moved Thirza deeply.

"If you would only stay until Mrs. Albert could come," he pleaded. "I can't be left alone with strange people. Sometimes I feel like selling out everything and taking a fresh start elsewhere. I don't seem to have any luck here at Westhorpe. And there's Palmer going ahead like a steam engine, making money in his mill and everywhere. Queer about his wife, that she couldn't be content.

She didn't do anything but drive around in her phaeton. And that she should take to theatre dancing! But she agreed that women had a right to do what they were best fitted for, and if the stories are true, she wasn't much loss as a house-keeper. There had to be two or three servants all the time."

"And if I come, there will have to be a servant here," rejoined Thirza. "I couldn't give up the work I have promised. I dare say people will think me extravagant."

She gave a soft little laugh.

"If you'll only stay! You can't imagine how lost and forlorn I feel." That plea was his sheet anchor.

Besides the kindness, it would give her time to plan out her own life a little, and, like Seth, she had rather a lost feeling. So she decided to remain awhile, yielding to the pressure. That she looked up suitable help did not surprise Mrs. Kent, though she counselled her not to run Seth too much in debt.

"I shall pay her wages myself. Seth will only give her her living. It would be too great a sacrifice to waste my time about the house."

"And of course you have forgotten all you did know. But we were brought up first-class house-keepers, and I never felt second to anybody. If

I had been a poor manager, John Kent wouldn't have prospered as he has, but when a woman sets out not to marry, of course she doesn't keep up in such matters."

Clara had not cordially forgiven her sister in the matter of Chris Morrow. He had married a girl from an adjoining town, quite an heiress, a commonplace, rather pretty girl whose complacency stood her in the stead of education, and who, like Chris, thought money the great thing. But then Thirza had some money as well. And Clara felt curiously aggrieved that Thirza should keep her youthful looks, that her figure should be slim and graceful, and that the best people of the town should pay her such deference. Not that she thought any one really better than herself. She didn't care for all this talk about higher education. Her girls would be trained to make good wives and mothers.

Thirza's touch was soon apparent in Seth Rolfe's home. Order, neatness, and regularity began to reign. Martha White had been living at the Palmers', and though she was not much of a gossip, now and then she spoke of some infelicity, and wondered how Mr. Palmer could have been so patient and indulgent.

While the children were at school, Thirza devoted herself to her work, and took now and then a part of the night, for she had been interrupted

so much. But as an offset she had been working steadily all the spring. She had quite a reputation now, and could make her own selections. She found herself in demand in the town. There was a Ladies' Club much interested in social advancements. The former Book Club had merged into a promising Free library, to which some of the well-to-do men had subscribed liberally. The churches had received a new impetus, and the plans for the Academy had been a success from the start.

They talked of this, one evening, when Palmer was over. He dropped in quite often. How much he had improved, she thought, or had she been a little blind to his possibilities?

"Ward had half a mind to go away, at one time," Palmer said, glancing furtively at her. "The spirit of unrest was strong upon him. I think he could make a mark somewhere."

"But why not make it here? I am sure he is giving tone and character to the town. You have all done much in the matter of improvement. You are making Westhorpe a delightful place in the broader sense," and her interest shone in her face. "When I have realized my fortune I think I shall come back here and spend my leisure years. Such a dream is the *avant coureur* of old age, I believe," giving a gay little laugh.

She did not show any indications of advancing

age, he thought. Was it the intelligence of her life that kept her so fresh and sweet, her definite ambitions, and working them out that had added force and breadth to her character? She was a really lovely woman; why should not Bernard Ward win her? Or was she meant to stand alone, to be sufficient for herself?

"I am glad you care enough about us to dream of coming back. I thought the city's gleam and glare had fascinated you."

"There are infinite points of interest in a great city. There are schools of every sort, teachers of every degree. There is the richness of many knowledges, there is entertainment, there is amusement of which one need only take the merest sip if one has the courage to be resolute. But it changes weary one, dishearten one, I might say. You make friends this year, and next year they may be on the other side of the continent. I am fond of permanency."

His eyes kindled, his whole face softened.

"Then you could be satisfied to come back here, if we go on improving the town to your liking?" and he gave a cordial, yet retrospective kind of laugh, as if his question had some meaning in it.

She colored with a touch of embarrassment, and said gravely: "I have always loved country places.

I would not like to think my whole life must be spent in the city."

Did it not argue well for Bernard Ward? "Do you ever hear from—" Thirza hesitated. She wanted to bring him back to a remembrance of his own duties. He should not be tempted, through her, to forget.

"From — Bessie?" His tone was very low. "Not in a long time. The company have been touring in Western cities, and expect to go South for a while. I think there is some prospect of their going abroad."

"None of her return?"

He rose and began to pace the floor softly. They were quite alone.

"No," he answered, with a slow decisiveness. "The life suits her. She is perfectly happy. She ridicules the idea of temptations, of dangers. Thirza, I have had no woman friend through all this time. When she first went away, I wanted to ask you to watch over her and keep me informed, but they left the city, and I had to trust her sense of propriety. Before that she had proposed a divorce."

Thirza shuddered a little, and he noted it.

"Perhaps I can never make any one understand how I came to marry her. I believe I was a good deal charmed with her, just at first. I thought

Aunt Hannah quite hard with her. Then those people came. Thirza, that summer and the talks with you two girls made a curious difference in all my thoughts and aims. Perhaps Ward had begun it. We had been such friends, and his estimate of my capabilities would have been flattering to some young men. I hardly believed it. I had experienced no particular want, but then a great, strange, tangled mass of thought seemed to pervade every pulse of my being, as if I was on the verge of some wonderful illumination. I wanted knowledge of all kinds. I began to study, read, and plan, and the new business projects crossed my path. My ambition was roused."

His face was transfigured with the light of energy, the force and dignity of an earnest nature absorbed in a serious determination to achieve higher resolves than any it had hitherto entertained. It was a fine face, and he had improved immeasurably.

"I did truly believe she loved me. I was not flattered; I think I was sorry it should be so. And at the crisis I did not see what was to be done. I was afraid to send her away to fight for herself. I don't believe she would have gone, then. So I married her. I had only a vague idea of love, but I think I knew, even then, what worship might be."

He was not looking at her, but engrossed with some inward sight that seemed to remove him from her half-suspicion, half-fear.

"If we could have waited. She saw her mistake first, I fancy, and fretted against it. There was nothing in my life that gave her any pleasure. Thirza, believe that I tried to love her, to make her happy. It could not be undone. People do outlive dissatisfactions. Incongruous natures get toned to each other."

"I do believe you," Thirza said solemnly.

"She made a friend — a woman who boarded at Westhorpe —"

"Mrs. Lowndes? Yes. One of those restless women always searching after novelties and excitements, and keeping a certain position in spite of some unfavorable gossip."

"She was an injudicious friend for my poor Bessie. She had a relative who was an actress, and they made the way possible and pleasant to her. She likes the life. I can offer no inducement for her return. She has once or twice pleaded for freedom. When the law's demands have been complied with I may entertain the idea, but I shall wait the appointed time, unless she takes the matter in her own hands."

Thirza drew a long breath. He had not asked for counsel. His way was straight and plain before

him. He would not burden any friend with his perplexities. But he longed for a certain friendliness to cheer him as he walked under the shadows. She could give it, and she had a feeling now that it would not be misunderstood. He had the full sympathy of Westhorpe, she knew well.

She pondered occasionally on these two women who had made such wrecks of their lives. Laura's weak and inefficient nature, with its mistaken ideas of wifely love, a passionate sense of motherhood with no practical knowledge, but a shallow self-complacency that she considered experience. She had not only wasted her own brief life, shortened it as well, but nearly ruined another. Would Seth ever recover from the influence of these years?

It seemed a better thing that Bessie should take the matter in her own hands and go away, regain her freedom sometime, and leave Palmer to work out a new destiny on the lines he was considering for himself. Already he was one of the rising men of the town.

Mrs. Albert could not come, as she had partly arranged. The farm was sold, the furniture divided, and then one of the daughters in a neighboring state fell ill and sent for her. But Thirza was deeply interested in the children. Edith, who had a curious, passionate nature, moved deeply by music and poetry, possessing a remarkable if un-

trained voice, was a child with many possibilities, and the saddest that of being misunderstood. She was considered a dull scholar, yet there were some things she seemed to understand by a rare intuition. Thirza's heart warmed curiously to her. Hazel was much brighter in a commonplace fashion.

But Thirza found matters bad enough with Seth. He was very much disheartened, and it did not seem possible for him to hold on to the farm and recover himself.

They went over the affairs in a very thorough manner. Nothing had prospered with him, and he had dropped to the depths of a man who believes he was born for bad luck. Once he proposed she should buy the farm. He would work it.

The old place! For a moment the thought thrilled her. Yet it was not the home of her childish imagination. She would rather be farther in town. And to depend upon vasculating Seth!

"I feel as if I would like to sell out the whole thing and take a fair start somewhere else," he said, one evening. "When a man gets into a rut, it's best to have a change. I never shall be any success here. Do you remember the Irvings who went to Oxford? You went to school with Ruth and Fanny."

"Yes; Ruth was married long ago." Thirza

smiled a little. "Jennie was very bright and capable."

"Ruth's husband has a great tract of land in Pasadena. He is prospering tremendously. Fanny went out there and married. Mrs. Irving died about two years ago, I think. There's Jennie, Louise, and their father left. The boys are all married, and they think of going out."

The Irving girls were healthy, good-natured, and industrious, at least as she remembered the older ones. There was a long silence. Then he cleared his throat and said: "I've half a mind to try life in a new place. I'm young enough to take a fresh start."

"Yes, quite young enough." She glanced him over. He had improved in his few months of widowerhood. He had gained some flesh; he held up his head with more assurance. Of course, he would marry again, sometime.

"I'm tired of all this. I've got down, and it's hard getting up. There would be the children to consider."

"Seth," she put her soft hand over on his, "will you give me Edith? She's a peculiar child; everybody wouldn't understand her, and you might not be able to do what is best for her. She will have a fine voice, and she has a passionate love for music. It is doubtful if

I marry; but I shall always keep a home, and I shall be able to educate Edith."

"You are awful good," he said, in a broken, childish fashion, his voice husky with emotion. "I was thinking of the children. Clara couldn't take them; but the Alberts might awhile, until I could send or come back for them. Poor Laura was so fond of them!" and he gave a soft, regretful sigh.

Thirza was more assured. He had gone over the plan before, that was evident.

"Then give me Edith. Laura would consent if she could. It will be a great interest in my life, — something to live for, to work for."

"See here, Thirza, you ought to be married and have children of your own. You have so many sweet, motherly ways," he exclaimed, with deep emotion.

"Then you will feel the safer in trusting her to me. I will care for them both, if you like, but Edith will be mine."

"Then you wouldn't oppose my going?" wistfully.

"Perhaps it would be best." Some one must come to his assistance if he remained here. He must regain a certain respect, if he ever was a success again.

"Oh, it would, I am sure." His voice rose buoyantly.

Was the whole world bent on marrying? She gave a curious inward smile. Jennie and Louise Irving were energetic, sensible girls. In a new place and with some stirring influence he might redeem the years the locust had eaten. And if one of these girls should fancy him. Was this man to be a burthen on her for years to come? But could she shift it to some other woman without being intolerably selfish?

He was not a bad-tempered man. He had no real vices. What he needed was some one to keep spurring him along with a kind of winsome steadiness. She had seen such men even in the city whose wives kept them up to a certain pitch in the great chords of life, and the daily music went on with few breaks. If she had it to do, she would soon despise the man.

"It is worth thinking about, Seth," she said, after a long pause. "You would have something after the place was sold and you could take a new start."

"I'd like to go out with the Irvings and see how the land lay. But I suppose Clara — and to sell the old place —"

"Mother might feel badly at the thought of it. Talk it over with John Kent, some day."

"I will walk over there on Sunday. John's pretty good-natured when he's had his Sunday

afternoon nap. I might take you and the children."

She would rather have him face the exigency himself. She did not go over to Clara's very often, for there was little pleasure in it. When her hours of work were ended, which she adhered to steadily, she found a great interest in the children, who began to thrive under her judicious care. Then there were letters from friends. The Otis family had gone up to an island on the coast of Maine, and Helen seemed very full of enjoyment, but longed for her. Mrs. Barthman had reached her new home and was in an enchanted land of bliss.

Palmer and Bernard Ward were inseparables, she heard. She had seen very little of the latter, except at church, where he sang in the choir. But she and Palmer were growing into a rare friendship. Perhaps Ward could not have had a more judicious partisan. She was thankful that Palmer should have so staunch a friend.

Ward had found excuses for not calling with Palmer. He would not force himself on any woman, he declared.

The distance between them rather amused Thirza at first, then piqued her a little. Why could they not be friends as in the old summer? Both had developed, both were richer for the ex-

perience of years. He was looked up to as an authority on educational matters and had written some rather striking articles for publication. She was proud of his remaining at Westhorpe.

Seth Rolfe turned over the matter of selling the farm, and at last broached it to his brother-in-law.

"If things keep on this way, you will lose it," said John Kent. "But you'll have a tussle with the women. Clara and her mother will consider it almost sacrilege."

"It's your idea, I know," Clara exclaimed indignantly to Thirza. "I should think *you* might have some regard for the home of your childhood, if Seth has not."

"If I were rich enough to remodel it, to keep a first-class farmer to work it, and have matters quite to my liking, it might look attractive. But at present I cannot afford any such step. Seth surely is not able to keep it."

"I've known women that farmed successfully. Look at Mrs. Firman over the river!"

Thirza laughed. Mrs. Firman was rough and coarse, and generally unkempt.

Clara turned red. "I didn't mean anything like that," she said. "But if you took hold and helped him—and if he goes West or wherever it is, he will marry one of those Irving girls. It's a

shame for him to be thinking of such a thing, and poor Laura hardly cold in her grave."

"And if I help straighten up matters with my energy and my money, he would probably marry again, sometime. It seems the way of the world. I have a right to my own life, and I mean to keep it."

"But what will Seth do when you go away? And to see our old home fall into strange hands!" Clara began to cry.

Thirza drew a long, anxious breath. Was she really her brother's keeper? She could imagine a brother, Royal Palmer for instance, that it would be a delight to live with. How curious that relatives did not always touch the divine chord of harmony. What made her so different from Clara? From a little girl Clara had resolved to marry, she remembered. She was often tired of her sister's complacent, unreasoning estimate of a commonplace husband. Clara had not forgiven Thirza's rejection of Chris Morrow. And she hated to have women saying, "I s'pose your sister'll be an old maid. Girls get mighty independent when they earn their own money."

Mrs. Albert was the next one to bewail poor Seth's misfortunes. What would become of the children? And poor Laura's money would go for nothing. Seth had been a wretched manager.

But it did seem as if the children ought to have Laura's money. No doubt Seth would marry again. It was man fashion," said Mrs. Albert, spitefully. "And I don't know as he has any real right to sell the place. Laura oughtn't have signed that mortgage."

Thirza often sat in the twilight considering her own future. A home she must have. She possessed the instincts of home-making in the highest sense. There were times when she wished she could deal them around to others. All women did not inherit them, although it was supposed to be natural gift. She had not been extravagantly fond of children, though this was considered an indication of the motherly instinct. The days when Clara's troop came out to the farm were times of weariness and vexation of spirit. But she was coming to have a passionate love for Edith, and to understand so clearly what might be done for her development. She longed for complete possession of the child, and she found Seth inclined to assent very readily.

Would not this, as well as marriage, give permanency to a home? Yet the city did not seem quite the place to bring up a child, although she had to confess there were many fine children in the city.

A new love for Westhorpe had stolen upon her

unaware. She had not so much leisure for work, yet she found her imagination vivid and at times brilliant. There seemed so much more food for it in the splendid outlook, the many changes, the superb coloring, and at moments she felt the true artist soul rise within her, and what she did then bore the marks of inspiration.

It would be pleasant to live in town, to have a pretty cottage and flower garden, to spend summer and autumn here, and then go to the city for a while in the winter to hear some good music and be in all the stir and brightness. How tempting the picture looked! Here she really could have a home—there were pretty houses within her means. Living in Westhorpe was less expensive than in the city.

The thought haunted her day and night. September came in with its rich fragrances and ripening glories. She drove around here and there and saw places that with a little money and taste would make ideal homes. Her very own house!

People were coming back. Miss Brinsley had been abroad, and on her return one of her first calls was paid to Thirza. They discussed the many changes, the improvements.

“Westhorpe is really waking up. The Seminary will add to our prestige. Father is engaged heart and soul in its prosperity. I wish you could be

persuaded to come back to us—not settle clear out here,” and she smiled. “I want you in town. I’ve been planning out a Club this winter. Why shouldn’t we women join to make this a sort of centre for womanly advancement, as well as to let the cities have it all?”

She was so bright and enthusiastic. Nearly thirty and not married. She must have had opportunities, with her many journeys, and her father’s house was always a centre for men of education and refinement. She had a certain power that was really fascinating.

She had come with an invitation as well. “They were to have a dinner and a sort of ‘evening’ afterward to ask in the neighborhood,” she said, with a smile. Miss Rolfe was to be one of the dinner guests. There were some people she particularly wanted her to see. They would send her home in the evening, so there would be no trouble about that.

Thirza was glad to go. The dinner party was quite large, and to her surprise both Bernard Ward and Palmer were there, though one of the clerical professors took her in to dinner and was very devoted to her. It was a delightful gathering, and one seemed to vie with another in the entertainment. Thirza had never known anything so brilliant at Westhorpe, and she began to realize how starved she was for true mental sustenance.

Ward watched her curiously. She had grown more beautiful with a kind of stately dignity, and a new charm, a vivid intelligence, that inspired those near her whether she talked or listened.

There was quite an accession of guests presently, young and middle-aged; some students from the Seminary and a number of young lawyers. Miss Brinsley begged Ward to sing, and sat down to play his accompaniment. Thirza had almost forgotten how rich and beautiful his voice was, and she listened with a peculiar delight.

He went to talk with some men afterward. She felt a little hurt that he should be so distant when they had been such friends.

A few days after this Seth had driven her in to Clara's. She was planning for her mother to come out and let her have a week in New York to attend to some important business. She had meant to stay to tea, but she found Clara tempestuous, and the house in a maze of confusion, as some furniture was being moved over in the new part.

Mrs. Rolfe promised to come the next week. "But you don't mean to go back to the city!" she said beseechingly. "I don't know what Seth would do without you. Laura was very fond of him, but 'pears to me she never had any faculty of getting along. I never see any one so always behindhand!"

And the other mother blamed Seth. Both might have been more stirring under different circumstances.

As she turned from the sidewalk to the country path a man came slowly towards her with a handful of late wild flowers. She knew the scholarly air and figure, and gave a little half-halt as they exchanged greetings.

"Are you going out home?" with a perceptible accent on the word as he stood undecided.

"Yes. What a lovely afternoon it has been. I almost envy you your stroll."

"Accept the result." She did not open her hand readily, he thought. Then they walked on in silence.

"I hear you are going to leave us. Palmer said you were thinking of flitting cityward. Are you tired of us?"

She drew her brows into a half-frown. "One of the necessities of business," she answered briefly.

"And you are going at the most beautiful season. The autumn is richer than the spring, and the city drearier." How can any one deliberately choose the stifling city, the towering houses that shut out the sky?"

There was a touch of irritation in his tone. She had wondered more than once why they did not get on better. The old summer had been so

pleasant. The still older remembrances were pictures and poems, as one might say, and haunted her now and then. She hated to let them go, but so many blossoms of youth turned into sere and yellow leaves, or dull brown ones. All summer the friendship had been briery. Was it because he was getting to be one of the important men of the town and rather disdained the toiling sisterhood?

"One doesn't always choose," she made answer, slowly. "There are duties and necessities, and one looks for satisfaction in them."

"I suppose so," drily. "And what more can one ask than a life full of satisfactions?"

"Very few lives are. Do you speak from experience?" And there was a half-irony in her tone.

"From experience — yes. Do you remember the other summer you were here? You and that Miss Otis? I am not sure but your talk roused me to a state of dissatisfaction. I thought I ought to try some new thing, some great thing."

"And you reconsidered?" It was half-inquiry, half-assertion, but she did not turn her face toward him. She was not much interested, he thought.

"Some of the great things do not bring satisfaction. Happiness, I take it, is a certain harmonious adjustment of circumstances with the true

wants of one's nature. I think I can recognize my own limitations. I am not ambitious."

"Are you not?" a little wonderingly. "Yet I think you have been achieving a great deal. Westhorpe would be loath to lose you."

"But I suppose you would consider it ignoble to be among the great men in a small place?"

"Westhorpe, as an intelligent county town, ought not to be called small," she said, rather resentfully.

"There is a great deal of striving and reaching up in the world, a great deal of pushing down. I might not be fortunate in gaining the highest round, and I did not want to be tossed about in vain endeavor, nor trampled under foot; so I decided to remain where I was."

"But you do not seem quite satisfied with it," she returned. "There are men of thirty who would be proud of your place, proud of having achieved so much early in life."

"Yes, men are more easily content than women. I wonder if we shall, by and by, be called the weaker sex?"

"There are some who will deserve it."

"You are going ahead so rapidly. The old things are certainly passing away. The home will fall into disuse when the interest of its queen and creator is elsewhere."

"That is the stock argument," said Thirza, rather annoyed. "Yet I think my brother's house has been as well kept this winter as if I had been guided by no other ambition, and I have done many things besides."

"But you are tired of it now."

She was tired of that house. Seth's complainings and commonplaces had wearied her, though she confessed it to no one but herself. But a broad, generous life, an intellectual nature met on its own comprehension, a share in the thoughts and feelings and aims of higher development, — why would men reduce things to one general level? Was she worthy of nothing higher than such a home?

"Yes, I am tired of that," she answered frankly, decisively.

There was a silence. The faint echo of the piping throats in the distant watercourses made the suggestive chorus of a spring evening. One almost forgot its source, so delightfully did it blend with the fragrant air.

Would she not tire of the monotony of any life? For all except those of luxury had a certain degree of sameness. And he recalled the fact that he had seen people bored with the pleasures of life.

"And glad to go away. I wonder when we shall see you again?"

She turned suddenly. Then she checked herself. Did he suppose she was going to stay? Well, it could not matter. They never had any pleasant talks alone. This half-cynicism spoiled him.

"I certainly do not intend to relinquish Westhorpe for good and all." She gave a short laugh. "I have some ties here. And I like the old place."

If she stayed away two or three years again, she might meet some one who would persuade her into matrimony, or she would be more vigorously set in her ways as a single woman. She did not need to accept anything at a man's hand—she could make her own home, gather about her a circle of friends. Let him admit that she was a very attractive woman for the world. All summer he had never seen her in Seth Rolfe's house, though he had met her elsewhere.

There was a certain swift rush that seemed to cleave the air, and a slight figure precipitated itself into Miss Rolfe's arms.

"Oh, Aunt Thirza! We were so afraid they would keep you to supper! I've run down twice, and I was almost afraid!"

She flung her arms around her aunt's neck with eager, childish abandon, drawing the tall figure down and kissing the face rapturously.

"Oh, Edith!" with soft, laughing remonstrance.

"I'm so glad! I was sure you wouldn't stay. I wouldn't have my supper until you came!"

"Here is Mr. Ward. You can hardly see him."

"Oh, yes I can!" Edith tossed her head with indifference; but she said, "Good evening." Then she danced by Thirza's side, patting the hand she held. How the child loved her! and she could go away!

They said a brief, cold farewell at the gate. Thirza was a little vexed. Ward turned and sauntered slowly homeward. It was no use to think of her. If he had asked her in that past summer, when he had refrained because he meant to have something worthy of her acceptance—well, her rejection would have ended his dream. Why did he covet her? It was a mystery to himself.

CHAPTER XV

WOMEN AND WOMEN

THIRZA found it very difficult to get away. Her mother and Clara could not understand why business must be so much to her. Pictures and book covers and designs for advertising did not seem very important work. Perhaps if Thirza had counted up her gains and laid the sum total before them, their opinion might have changed.

"You needn't have done anything. You could have been kept a lady, since you're so fond of grand folks. I do think you've been very short-sighted," declared her sister.

Thirza had to stay to the "house-warming," as Clara called her announcement of the fact that her house was finished and furnished. It was quite a pretentious double house now, with a long parlor on the new side, and two chambers above. A large number of guests were bidden. The Kents had many well-wishers and friends, and were prospering finely. But Thirza was glad there were other standards of excellence, a more subtle, as well as the practical value affixed to qualities

outside of money. Westhorpe was taking on a finer intellectual aspect. If Clara Kent was not drawn into this circle, it gave her no pang. She did not care for it nor understand it, and she had no ambitious leanings that way. She thought it could be opened any time with a golden key, when one really desired admittance.

At last Thirza found herself in the city, and made most welcome at the Otis family hearth. She was so fresh and bright and eager, and had so many quaint bits to rehearse, that Helen laughed at the idea of her country seclusion. The many changes and the advancement of the town interested her greatly.

Helen had changed in some admirable fashion. They talked this over when they had retired.

"You were right about the duty aspect," Helen admitted, with a smile and some rising color. "When you first came here I absolutely envied you, or one of your friends. I hated to think the only career open to me was marriage. I wanted to do something that would bring me a separate life, a position of my own. I have learned much since then, and have come to appreciate papa's choice that has given me a sister friend. I used to wish I had been your sister, or better still, that you had been mine. And this really may be possible. You have no settled plans?"

"Not exactly *settled*." Thirza gave an embarrassed little laugh. Would her plans look queer to Helen?

"You contemplate matrimony. Oh, you deceitful woman!"

"No, it is not matrimony. No man hath asked me. As women grow older, their thoughts *do* centre more longingly about a permanent home. Work interests me more every month. And a duty seems absolutely thrust into my life. My brother has one child of a peculiar, but I think not difficult, temperament. She loves me in an eager, absorbing fashion. And I love her. I want her because in the wrong hands she may be ruined. Her father has been unfortunate, and desires to make a new start elsewhere. It will be the best thing for him."

"And you mean to take this child to educate?"

"I covet her. Can you understand that? I haven't many theories about children; perhaps as I grow older I may come to them. She has a marvellous voice, I think; she has a passionate love for the few things and the few people who suit her — the rest she does not care for. She is bright and eager under certain influences, cold and silent under others — sullen, my sister says. The younger girl, Hazel, is one of the bright, good-humored commonplace children with no super-

sensitive nerves, rather pretty and the favorite with every one."

"And the elder appeals to your pity? You have such a generous nature, Thirza."

"Not merely pity. I have a kind of motherly assurance that I can develop her into a happy and satisfying girlhood, a more nearly perfect womanhood, than some others might, because I understand her. She is one of the 'queer' children, and queer people are often unamiable."

"It is a kindly and generous undertaking. But it may hamper you unless you do mean to settle to a single life. And oh, Thirza, my father is right, the best and highest home happiness must be in married life; I am beginning curiously to comprehend that. Aunt Margaret and Aunt Esther led very narrow and restricted lives. Even now, sweet as Aunt Margaret is, her sympathies do not flow out widely."

"They were of the older generation, lady-like. The new woman has a wider range," smilingly. "She has claimed the right to work for the world's advancement. That doesn't mean merely to earn money for herself. Every one who adds a grace or pleasure to any duty is an apostle of the new faith. Every woman who has no need of work and who respects her sister woman in the field of labor, helps to honor it. I am glad there are

women of leisure and ease who can take up the duties the others cannot find time for. I think we have come to recognize the individual needs rather than the class needs."

"How much breadth you have, Thirza! You disprove the theory that any strongly accented line of birth or early education must impress itself firmly upon the individual. You might have been the product of a wide and varied city culture."

Thirza laughed and colored. Her father had tastes in a refined direction, but no ambition; her mother had the sort of rude country activity in a commonplace way. And she perhaps had united the best forces. Would she have worked her way out of dissatisfactions and found her true status if her legacy had not come to her? There was a good deal in opportunity.

For several days Thirza was very busy. Employers received her with new interest. Yet her little circle had changed curiously. Some had gone abroad. Some, after a few years of struggle and self-denial, had married and dropped their ambitions, just when success stood on their threshold. If she came back, she must make a new little home-world for herself. The Otis household would take her in gladly.

"I used to be delighted that I was an only child," Helen said, "and now I long for the inti-

mate companionship of a sister who would suit me as you do. If it were not for the child, I should use my strongest powers of persuasion."

"I cannot give her up, and I think she needs the freedom of country living. If she should keep her voice, one of the most uncertain of gifts, I shall spend winters in the city later on."

A little of the old jealousy stirred Helen's heart. Was she never to be the first consideration with any one?

Mrs. Otis was deeply interested in Thirza's plans. She was so eager and earnest, so full of love for her little niece, that no one could suggest that she would take a great burthen upon herself.

"Still, I can't help hoping the best of all joys will come to you some day," the elder woman said. "I thought I had accepted my destiny and was content with it. But true happiness and rest from vague longings can belong only to the life that attains its full development in one supreme affection."

Thirza smiled absently. Had any one ever touched the subtle chord of her soul except to make a jarring and confused discord? She could evolve her own satisfactions. Perhaps she was too proud of her own strength. What if health should fail? No; she would not face that ugly gray shadow.

But there was so much to do and to enjoy, and a day taken out now and then, that her fortnight stretched into a month, and her mother's letters became very importunate. Yet the one that moved her most was a little misspelled scrawl from Edith.

"DEAR AUNT THIRZA, — If you do not come home soon, I shall go out in the woods and die like the little babes, and go to heaven with my own mamma. I am so tired, and I hate both grandmothers, and Aunt Clara scolds me every time. I don't love any one but you ; only papa a little, and Hazel when she doesn't plague me. I cry every night for you."

Thirza's eyes filled with tears.

They were loath to have her go when the winter season with its music and diversions of all kinds was just commencing. But she comforted herself with the thought that when matters were really settled she could come to the city occasionally with Edith and be quite her own mistress.

She found the household in great confusion. Mother Albert had been making a visit, and her opposition to having the farm sold, as well as her daily strictures upon her son-in-law, had nearly driven him wild. Edith was pale, large-eyed, and hysterical. Mrs. Rolfe was not well, and worn out with the confusion.

"I never saw such a time as those women have had!" declared Martha. "I wouldn't have staid a day after Mrs. Albert came if I hadn't promised you, and if you had not been paying my wages. They think help awfully extravagant; but I notice they've made my life a burthen with their extra work, and yet they're always talking about working so hard themselves, and that *you* can't know anything about housekeeping, and that the children will be ruined. If Mr. Rolfe wasn't as easy as an old shoe, he'd 'a' sent 'em both away."

He did take Grandmother Rolfe home the next morning. Mrs. Albert declared, "Seth was crazy to think of going out West and leaving all his folks. Couldn't Thirza influence him? She knew very well it was all on account of those Irving girls."

"We could hardly expect so young a man as Seth to deny himself a home all the rest of his days," said Thirza, with some spirit.

"He can't have any better home than this," snapped his mother-in-law. "And while you've nothing else to do, I don't see why you can't take care of it for him. If he'd just put his shoulder to the wheel, which he never has done, he'd soon bring the place up, and pay off the debts. But he sha'n't wrong poor Laura's children!"

Mrs. Albert began to cry.

However, after a few days, she went her way,

and Thirza restored the olden methods. But Seth was uneasy and variable in his moods.

Christmas came, with its festivities, in which Thirza could not help but take a share; and this brought her in contact with Bernard Ward. He had imagined from Palmer's remark that she had gone to the city for the winter. There was a mysterious pleasure in having her here, an unquiet pain as well.

Edith took part in the Christmas festival for the children,—a sort of musical cantata of the birth of Christ, with recitations between. She was shy, rather capricious, and perverse in many ways; but she loved to sing, and did it with an unconscious grace, as if she was singing merely for her own pleasure. She acquitted herself remarkably well, and the praises would have rendered Hazel unendurably vain; but so long as she had satisfied Aunt Thirza, she cared for nothing else, and the admiration was harmless.

"Her voice ought to be cultivated," Ward said, as he and Thirza stood together, distributing the last of the gifts. "You make a new child of her, Miss Rolfe. She has a peculiar face, dull and almost vapid at times; then it lights up as if suddenly transfigured, and expresses startling possibilities. One could do a good deal with her, or really ruin her."

"I hope she will be saved," Thirza returned, but he fancied indifferently. He liked best her old enthusiasms.

The following month was very busy for her. She had to decline social pleasures, except now and then of an evening, and work with the utmost industry. Seth thought it hard that she could not listen to the old woes, that had been rehearsed hundreds of times, it seemed to her, and the pros and cons of selling. So he often found his way up to the Irvings' for the evening. They were to start in April.

And if no one bought the farm?

Thirza sighed over this possibility. A single life did not relieve one from care, it seemed.

"And you might as well be in New York, for all the good you are to us," fretted Clara. "Mother's real poorly; she's never been well since that visit to Seth's. And Aunt Abby is so crippled up with rheumatism that she can hardly get about, and next thing she'll be helpless in bed. I should like to keep a girl, and take it easy, but I really can't afford the expense;" and Clara sniffed in her most disapproving manner.

"You ought certainly to have help," Thirza said calmly. Martha, she knew, had been a thorn in the side of the Kents.

"I can't find it in my conscience to waste money that way!" was the retort.

Westhorpe continued its social strides. The Ladies' Club had been laughed at in its inception, but it proved a really delightful endeavor. Thirza found it a great pleasure and comfort. There were several fine musicales, and an Amateur Dramatic Club, that gave two entertainments, and some readings. Now and then something from the city found its way thither, and was thoroughly enjoyed.

One March day a purchaser came to hand for the Rolfe farm. There was the usual lengthened-out discussions, and inspections, and arguments. The children's money was to be retained on bond and mortgage, the debts to be paid, and there was so little remaining that Thirza pitied her brother sincerely.

Still, his spirits rose at once. And then he confided in a hesitating, blundering sort of way that he had "talked the matter over with Jennie Irving, and she was willing to marry him, and though it wasn't quite a year, and poor Laura—but the Irvings were going to start—and it seemed a new chance for him—"

"Yes," Thirza said sympathetically. "And oh, Seth, try your very best for her sake, for your own sake. I think you can succeed. She is a spirited, sensible girl."

"Oh, Thirza, heaven bless you!" He put his arms around her neck in a tender clasp. "I told Jennie about Edith — *do* you want her?"

"I do. You need never feel troubled about her. I will do my best for her and give her a mother's love. Hazel is so bright and gay she will win friends anywhere."

"Poor Laura loved them so. But she never seemed to know just what to do. Poor girl, it would have broken her heart to give up the farm. Of course, if she had lived, I must have worked through some way. Oh, Thirza, you've been a good angel to me!"

One rarely confessed that a man's life was marred by his marriage. Seth Rolfe went out to begin a new life on the wreck of inefficiency, and he prospered under different auspices.

But it created a great commotion. Mother Albert came down and cried over the children; Laura's poor dears were to fall into the hands of a stepmother. She should think Seth *would* want to go away; he never could hold up his head again in Westhorpe.

Clara was indignant as well.

"You're a fool, Thirza, to have that child saddled upon you!" she declared. "If Jenny Irving wanted him so badly, she might have taken him with both of them. A widow with children does

stand a chance to be married, but an old maid with an encumbrance — ”

Thirza flushed with a feeling of anger.

“I don’t know what right the world has to be so unreasonably discontented with a woman who does not marry, when she makes her own way and asks no odds of any one,” she retorted.

Seth paid his debts and held up his head like a new man. The marriage was a very quiet one and did not take place until the morning of their journey. Hazel was wild with delight at the thought of a new adventure, and kissed her stepmother with much fervor. Edith looked on with wondering eyes, holding tightly to Aunt Thirza’s hand lest she should be spirited away. Love counted for more than relationship.

Jennie Rolfe kissed her sister-in-law, with tears in her eyes.

“You have been sweet and cordial, and I thank you,” she said, with a great tremble in her voice. “And if at any time life should change with you and you should want to give up Edith, remember that we shall both keep a place for her in our hearts. Whatever is best for your brother, I shall do, and we both hope for success.”

CHAPTER XVI

THE STORY EVER NEW

THE morning of Seth's departure Thirza had a letter from Helen Otis, who had been much disappointed that Thirza had not been able to make a second visit.

In May Mr. Otis was going abroad on business, a hurried and engrossing tour, and would return in July. Aunt Margaret had been seized with a desire to spend another summer in Westhorpe, and Mrs. Otis had some curiosity to see the place.

"Do you suppose Mr. Palmer would rent his house for the summer?" she inquired. "We could all join and make a delightful household. I am not hankering after any fashionable resort, and I do long for you. Think it over, if it is not too wild. You are such friends, you would not mind laying the matter before him."

Thirza had made no plans for herself, there had been so much to think about for Seth. Clara expected her to come; with her there was room enough now, but Thirza felt that would be impossible if she wanted to work or to have any comfort with Edith. There were two or three cottages in

town that their owners were desirous of selling, but at present she did not feel able to face a new line of arguments, and she could not tell just what she did want.

Royal Palmer drove her and Edith home from the station, whither they had gone to say good-bye, and she laid the case before him.

"Why, that's odd; Mrs. Goodsell has to go away, her mother has had a stroke of paralysis. I had half a mind to try hotel living for the summer. I am away a good deal. And I can make arrangements for the men. It's a capital idea. Yes, with all my heart. You must let me visit you. It will seem like old times. Only we shall miss Aunt Hannah," and he sighed.

"I should bring Martha. It's a lovely day, and I am in no hurry, so let us take a good long drive and plan it all out."

"You will need a carriage and one man. Jacob Griggs is there, and he can oversee the farming. His married sister will take in the hands. I built a handsome new barn last fall. I am just delighted. Only I am afraid it will fall through," and Palmer looked at her doubtfully.

"It doesn't sound like a probability, to be sure," and Thirza gave a low, doubtful laugh.

"I am glad you are not going away. Thirza, this friendship has been so much to me all winter.

It has been a great deal to me since the old summer. It has helped me to bear the result of my mistake with a clearer understanding. Generosity looks very attractive to us in youth, and we have faith enough then to believe it will beget a like return. But if your creditor is poor and arid in soul, you can never reap the highest reward for your sacrifice. I ought to have known," with a soft, rather conventional laugh, "that you could not raise any fine crop on a poor soil. I surely was farmer enough for that! But we are not trained to consider marriage of such supreme importance. You wise women must set us a better example in that. I think you will. And then friendship will be held in higher esteem."

Was there any deeper meaning in his words? Her heart gave a quick throb of suspicion, and she compelled herself to glance up into the clear, tranquil eyes alight with serene honor.

"When can you hear?" he asked.

"I will write at once."

"I give you *carte blanche* to promise anything."

She did write immediately on her return. Clara and John Kent drove over that evening to insist upon her coming to them at once.

"I have promised to stay until Mrs. Burnham can come, — three or four days, — and then I will accept your hospitality," Thirza promised.

"Mother's heart is most broken. If the boy had lived, we should all have insisted upon the farm being kept. The idea of it going out of the family! And Seth running away in that fashion! Well, I suppose Jennie was glad of almost any chance, now! She's twenty-eight if she's a day old, and those girls haven't been exactly run after."

Thirza wondered a little why it was so, when they were good sensible girls, excellent house-keepers, and had helped to get a living out of the little old farm. Laura Albert's money had made her quite a "catch" in country parlance, yet it was true that Seth had dropped down every year of his married life, and Thirza had never seen the home when it was really comfortable.

The new owner arrived, and Thirza went to her sister's. Clara did not altogether like the idea of having Edith around in her best spare room, and proposed she should go in with the children. Thirza had already trained her to habits of neatness, and preferred keeping her to herself. She was giving her lessons, as she had not been able to go to school steadily, and drawing was a source of great amusement to her. Then Edith was not fond of the ordinary rough plays of noisier children.

"You'll make a regular little prig of her," insisted Clara. "Old maids' children are always

perfect, of course, but mighty hard for the rest of the world to get along with. Hazel was worth two of her any day."

A week afterward Helen's letter arrived. The young girl and Mrs. Otis would reach Westhorpe on a certain day. Would Thirza engage a room for them at a hotel? They would consider and decide what was needed.

Thirza did this, and sent Royal Palmer for them while she walked over to the hotel. Later on they went to the Palmer house, and Mrs. Otis was delighted with the aspect of the place and the beautiful outlook. They spent the remainder of the day in driving about and making arrangements. Palmer came to dinner with them at the hotel, and drove Thirza home in the evening. She thought she had never seen him at such a decided advantage.

They finished their visit the next morning. Helen and Aunt Margaret would be up shortly, when Thirza would join them, and the three would begin home life.

"I want the breadth of a country May. Though the city is not at such a desperate pass, even if the bird voices are only sparrows' chirps;" and Helen smiled. "There are bits of greenery in sheltered yards, and the windows bewilder you with their treasures of hot-house bloom, and the

gay procession in and out of the stores is enlivening. But the dust and dreariness of summer is hard to bear."

They spoke of Palmer just at the last. He was standing on the platform with Mrs. Otis, making some last arrangements.

"He has changed beyond measure," Helen Otis said. Yet she thought of the girl singing and dancing in her frivolous fashion, with an intense mental protest. Was all his life to be shadowed by this mistake?

"And does he hear from —" Helen paused; what should she call her?

"Bessie? Very rarely. I wonder —"

"I saw her in the winter," said Helen, with rising color. "I absolutely made papa take me. It is quite a nice company of its kind, but not a high kind; not positively vulgar, however. But Royal Palmer's wife dancing to a crowd, singing for applause! If she were compelled, by any stress, to do it, one would not blame her so much. I thought of him and was ashamed for her."

"It has hurt him cruelly. No one speaks of it. The general impression is that some day he will regain his freedom. We have all changed so much since that summer, the inevitable change of progression. But I shall have to confess that you were a better judge of his capabilities than I who had

known him from childhood. I sometimes wonder if a little stronger influence could have shown him the unwisdom of such a step, even when inspired by a large-hearted generosity."

There was a proud high light in Helen's face as they exchanged good-byes.

Clara Kent was rather astounded at the proposed arrangements, in which she had not been consulted.

"I shall have to work quite steadily to meet all my engagements," Thirza explained. "I must have a quiet workroom and sufficient space. Martha will stay with us through the summer, and in a fortnight or so Mrs. Otis will come and take charge. Mr. Palmer is away so much that we shall not feel that we have deprived him of a home. It must be lonely for him, and boarding at a hotel will be a pleasant variety."

"Why doesn't he get a divorce and be a free man? Everybody is wondering about it," she said energetically.

"I think he would rather have Bessie take the definite step. Besides, why should he act hastily in a matter of such importance?"

Clara looked sharply at her sister, but Thirza was watching some incident from the window. She had not been much in favor of him when Morrow stood in the way, but Palmer had passed him in prosperity, just as he had always been his

superior in intelligence and social standing, and if he were free, she half fancied Thirza would not be obdurate.

"The servants always said he was awfully indulgent to her. He spoiled her, but she wasn't good stock on the mother's side. Aunt Hannah Gage never put her forward as if she took much pride in her. It was a foolish thing to marry her, and she went off of her own accord, ran away, although he pretended he knew about it, and gave out, at first, that she was coming back. If I could advise him, I'd just say: 'You get rid of her as soon as you can.' If he doesn't, she'll spring some trap on him, you mark my words. Everybody's on his side."

Thirza made no reply. She knew there were various surmises about Bessie — some not much to her credit. But she was rather proud of Royal Palmer in that he seemed in no undue haste to regain his freedom.

Mrs. Rolfe took the plan more resentfully than any one.

"It does seem as though you might stay with me a little," the elder lady said, in a fretful tone. "You might as well have been married; you couldn't be any more taken up than you are with picture makin'. It may be a great thing for a woman to work for her living,

but I think to be in a nice home and have plenty —”

“I shall have a nice home of my own some day, and you shall be in it. It *is* hard for you here in all the confusion.”

“Well, Clara’s real good to me. To be sure, I ain’t beholden; and the Lord knows I do enough for my keep. But that poor old creetur Aunt Abby’s going to be a great burthen. She’s most helpless now. I don’t know as Clara’s bound to have her; but there’s no place except the poorhouse, and John Kent wouldn’t hear to her being sent there.”

“I should think not!” The ruthlessness of the idea shocked Thirza. “She’s been here seven years working for Clara. She’s kept house and nursed, toiled early and late; and she was a capable woman when she came. And she’s done it for mere board and clothes. If Clara had given her twelve dollars a month, she might have saved up quite a sum. Yes; I think Clara owes her the care. But I’m glad she isn’t an old maid!” and Thirza gave an indignant half-laugh.

Mrs. Rolfe was extinguished. She often admitted that she did not know what to make of Thirza.

Aunt Abby had married an inefficient man

and been left a widow with four children. Two had died before reaching maturity. One son had married and died, leaving quite a family. One daughter had married a rather roving fellow and followed him about the world in poverty. She was John Kent's own aunt, and he would not see her want; but now there was only this home between her and destitution. Clara did complain of the great burthen, and Thirza was free to come and go as she pleased, and keep herself young and fresh. Then the sting of all was that she didn't really mind being an old maid.

Thirza was very busy the next week. She had her belongings sent to the Palmer house, her boxes that had been stored in New York and her choice articles left at the Otis home forwarded to her. She said nothing of the plan of a permanent home, though Clara talked of her coming back for the winter. But she knew now it would be martyrdom to live with Clara. Was she growing set and opinionated at twenty-five?

Thirza fitted up a corner of the new barn for a workroom; for though she had taken up painting with an ardent love, she would hardly dignify it by the finer appellation of Studio. Miss Brooke and Helen came back to their old rooms;

and, though they had been a little changed, the aspect was still familiar. The carriage and the mare were at hand. Bessie's pretty phaeton stood unused in the carriage-house, shrouded in its linen covering. The "spare room" down-stairs had been transformed into a really attractive sitting-room and contained the piano.

Palmer came and went with a certain fine friendliness that was admirable. Helen and little Edith made friends at once. The child was fascinated with the piano, and Helen insisted upon giving her lessons. Aunt Thirza played only the simplest of home tunes. But Edith stole now and then to the studio with some quaint book of musical rhymes. For her the whole world was set to music.

It was the last of May when Mrs. Otis came, with her husband, who could only devote a few days to them; but he was both surprised and pleased at the general air of refinement as well as progress. Palmer was glad of an opportunity to show him the courtesy of a host in all outside matters.

"I can't understand how a man like Palmer could make such a blunder in his marriage, when he had a woman like Miss Rolfe before his eyes," Mr. Otis said to his wife. "Her contact with the world has not destroyed any feminine charm. She

is an admirable mother to the little girl and a delightful home-maker. You could fancy her being very ambitious for the man she loved. This young man, I find, has quite a leaning toward politics, and is wonderfully well informed. It is not such wretched business here as in the large cities. The home population understand their own interests better, and there is no large foreign element. But Palmer will be a success in any business he may undertake."

"I like him very much," she returned. "He and Miss Rolfe show that a friendship is possible between a man and a woman."

"Perhaps the new woman has discovered the secret," and Mr. Otis smiled.

"He is not confusing the friend with the lover. I think some rare women have learned it before this."

"I am glad to leave you in such good hands, but I shall want to hurry back. It would be like living in Arcadia to spend a summer here."

Thirza felt quite elated with his commendation on her native town. She was more confident than ever that she had made a wise decision, even for herself, and certainly it would be best for Edith. The child grew daily more fond of her. Sometimes Thirza's heart almost ached for the mother in her grave that she had not been able to impress

her personality more strongly on husband and children.

Some subtle trend of circumstances brought the four together much as they had been that first summer. Bernard Ward drifted over to them, not dreaming that he was really impelled by Palmer, who felt there was some fine adjustment between him and Thirza yet to be reached. As for himself, he would hardly have gone alone, though an irresistible charm drew him thither.

Ah, that lost, lovely summer! Why had Roy not known himself, and life better? Yet then he had been only a sort of humble servitor to Helen Otis. But he knew, now, that her influence had proved a great factor in his aims and advancement. The material had all been there, but some divine spark was needed to kindle the flame. She would never know, of course. He could not tell her now. He must respect the gulf between, partly of his ignorant making.

Yet it was dangerous to spend evenings on the old porch with the feeling of ownership he could not divorce from himself. And sometimes vague, half-dreams crept in unconsciously, a dream of what might have been, perhaps, if he had been wiser and had known the world better, been roused to a sense of the man within him, to some insight

or authority that was to lift him above the plane of that old life.

Ward had resolved to go away at the very beginning of vacation. He had been surprised beyond measure when he heard of Thirza's intended return, and her plan of remaining some years in Westhorpe. She had not hinted it that unlucky evening. Why had he been so captious? Why, indeed, except that he had been sore at heart with a sense of impending loss?

She had shown no resentful remembrance. They had met at the house of a mutual friend, and he had found her bright and cordial, full of her new project, and delighted with the coming of her friend. He had slipped into the circle without giving it much thought, and found Miss Otis really charming with her maturity and broadening experiences. Miss Brooke had aged a good deal, and claimed him at once as a friend, and Mrs. Otis attracted him by her musical knowledge and appreciation.

They were drawn into many outside pleasures as well. Thirza groaned sometimes.

"You women of leisure can't realize how hard it is to fill the two places," she said, with a dainty sound of complaint in her voice. "When I am off pleasuring, I think of the neglected work at home. If the pleasures would only come at stated times,

but they are famous for having all hours for their own, morning, noon, and night."

"But need you be so engrossed?" pleaded Helen.

"The direful result of business. You must work when it comes. Perhaps I crowded myself a little, thinking of the home I wanted to make, and all there was to do, but I shall be quite free in August."

They had been planning a day's outing. Helen looked disappointed. Ward raised his eyes, and something in them gave Thirza's cheeks a hot flush.

"We might help a little," said Miss Otis, "in taking the care of the house, and give you several days to yourself. The party will lose its charm without you. And since Mr. Ward is going away —"

"I ought not —"

"But you said if you worked every morning for a week," interposed Helen. "Two afternoons will make up. We really cannot spare you."

"She will go." It was Palmer who decided with his bright smile. "Since it is to be a sort of family party, she will not be cruel enough to leave a blank in her place. Indeed, I am afraid we would have to give it up."

"Oh, no!" with an accent of protest. Thirza yielded.

There were a few other congenial friends, and the day was one of delight to all parties. There was a drive to a most enchanting spot, a sail upon the river with a soft breeze to temper the heat, and the dancing shadows of the great trees along the picturesque bank, a luncheon, gypsy fashion, much lounging on the short, thick turf, and fragmentary talk.

Thirza had been sitting quite alone, and was making a sketchy bit of some combination that seemed to her rather striking. Palmer had Mrs. Otis and Miss Brooke. Some of the others had wooed away Helen.

Thirza finished and closed her tiny sketch-book with the consciousness of a presence, though she could not hear the soft step. Bernard Ward came on, stood almost beside her, when she sprang up with a troublesome color she would have given much to have kept out of her face.

"It was very rude of me to stop here," she said, as if half in apology; "but everybody seemed engrossed, and there was such a charming little scene. Shall we hunt up the others now? We might go and spoil Roy's very good time." He was stretched out on the grass talking to the two elder women.

"No, don't spoil any one's good time," he returned abruptly. "They come so seldom."

"Then, shall we walk —"

"Why can't we stay here? You were very picturesque a moment ago."

How long had he been studying her? She had put on her hat now; then it was lying on the grass, and her soft, dark hair was a little blown about by the wind and made shadows over her white forehead. She stood uncertainly.

"One can never pose the same way twice, unless one has had a good deal of practice."

"You were not posing," rather indignantly.

Thirza gave a short, soft laugh that did duty for a reply. Then she took a few steps in a somewhat hesitating fashion.

"Thirza," his hand was on her arm, but with no restraining pressure. The very gentleness touched her seriously. "Thirza, I have been trying to say something for a month or more. Do you remember the night you and I walked out to the old homestead?"

"Oh, so long ago; April, wasn't it?"

"I was churlish that night. I want to apologize for it. Was that why you made no mention of your plans — your return?"

"I thought they would not interest you."

"Yet everything has interested me from the very first."

"Only, you don't quite approve. But at first you helped and advised."

"Do you know why I have seemed changed and unfriendly?" He glanced suddenly into her eyes. She was not prepared for the intense, searching expression, grew confused, and turned away.

"You are coming here to live. I shall see you quite frequently, no doubt, and if we cannot be friends —"

"Why can we not be friends? What is there so antagonistic in human nature that half the world must fly out at the other half?"

She drew her brows in a little impatient frown, yet she did not guess how cruel the words seemed.

"Because I love you." He said it sturdily, and it sounded to her as if he said it hopelessly as well. "I have loved you since I first came here. I meant to help you, but you so soon outgrew anything that I could do. You went onward with such a bound. You found your place, a place in which there was no room for me."

How did he know? He had never asked. Was she amazed? It seemed like some fact she had dimly suspected long ago.

"You did help me in that longing, ignorant girlhood. You said then —"

The soft air ran up and down octaves of melody among the trees. Its fragrance was like some rare draught, and gave him a sudden courage.

"I wonder how it would have been if I had said then, 'I love you. Be my wife. Let us take up together this strange, sweet, mysterious thing we call life. Let me be your teacher still, let me share your ambitions, let me help and uphold you.'"

He was looking steadily at her. An old remembrance thrilled her. If he had spoken then, what would she have answered? She had not been hurt or disappointed, yet an impassioned word might have swayed her. There was a great confusion in her mind. Was she glad or sorry?

"I *did* see the possibilities in you. Yet perhaps if I had known what dormant powers I unchained by bidding you go and try, if I had not felt with the proud security of youth that you would come back to me little changed indeed, or if I had held more in my hands to offer you, I might have been less generous. I, too, had wild dreams of going out in the great world and winning some standing-place you would consider worthy of your acceptance. Perhaps I am weak, unambitious. So many make failures. How could I be sure of success?"

"But you are a success here. You and Roy and many others are building up a splendid place! Why, I think you did find your true work."

He was glad to hear her say it, and yet it filled him with a strange sadness.

"But it will give me no great name. I might not have won the name anywhere. I like the life, the refinements, the leisure, the friends; I am not fond of the rush and the turmoil of the world. One's best life is lived from within, outward. So then I shall have to admit that I have lost in your estimation. I shall never have anything to offer that you would accept, and yet I have gone on loving you."

She looked away. Her hands dropped at her sides.

"I shall go on loving you until some one else has a better right, and this is why I have been miserable and captious, and why the old friendship has ended. You have outgrown it, you have nothing to put in its stead. It leaves a blank."

"You are quite sure?" she said softly, after a long silence.

"You have so many better things to occupy the place of an old-fashioned love, so many interests, that poor love would get quite crowded out. A man does not want a little pity or sympathy, a crumb of regard now and then, a share in the admiration a woman wins. And since you have settled your life —"

Had she settled it beyond peradventure? If he had spoken in the other summer — had she unconsciously cared for him all these years, and was

this why she thought so little of others, for some regard had come in her way.

"I have settled some things," she said defiantly, while the color rose in her face. "I have found a place that I shall not easily give up. I love my work. Perhaps it does take some of the romantic halo out of a woman's life, though why, I do not understand." She paused a moment, proud and erect.

"A man loves to provide for his wife, to care for her," he said, with a conscious weakness that pained him.

"And if both provide, if both have leisure to enjoy, does it matter if she does one kind of work or another? If she is capable of making a home—"

"If a man must seek admittance into it—I should despise myself if I were as weak as that."

"I told you I had settled some things. You must listen to me;" she began with a curious sense of defiance. "I have taken my brother's child. I love her. I cannot now relinquish her. I would not, even if I could honorably. So let us go on," she cried impatiently, turning away. "We seem to stand on opposite shores."

Was there a touch of regret in her tone?

He caught her hand. "Tell me that I am never to come over, but to keep my side rigorously. Then out of the ruins I may build up some new shelter or rule to guide me in the future —"

His voice was husky, and wavered a little at the last word. Thirza was silent.

"You shall say you despise me; that you could not, would not, take the best I have to offer."

"Have you offered me the best?"

"Thirza!" He glanced into her eyes an instant. They were not obdurate eyes; they had a strange, soft mistiness.

"I offer you all I have; my very soul, my life, and all that may be in it. I may never win any great name or high position; you may do better alone; but I shall love you to the end of my life, you, and no other woman."

There was a smile in her eyes now. Did she incline toward him, or was he dreaming? They had walked farther into the edge of the wood, and now he clasped her in his arms.

"All this while you have been afraid," she said softly. "And you know a woman likes courage, earnestness."

He was studying her in a dazed, mysterious fashion. "Can you give up so much?" he asked, wonderingly.

"I am not going to give up much," she said, in a light, tender, daring tone. "I told you I liked my work just as you like your teaching. And now I have taken another life and soul with all its capabilities into my care. I could not put this

burthen on you, on any one, but I think it will not interfere with my home-making, since a home I must have in any event. And suppose I say I like you better just here in Westhorpe than struggling to attain some greater thing, that may come when one is fitted for it?"

They stood there, the man and the woman, looking at life with the seriousness of a true, high purpose, but not with any wild theories. Perhaps both felt there was much to learn and much to forget, and that the present excess of emotion was not all of love, but there were finer and truer heights that it would be their delight to attain. But there was a light shining in her eyes that gladdened his very heart.

"Dear," he said, with deep feeling, "I must learn to love you as you deserve. I have been despairing and jealous and prideful."

"You have only to be your own generous self, as you were at first. Yet if you had spoken then, I might have been to-day only a commonplace woman —" she paused, thinking of her sister, of Laura. No, her experience with the world had not injured any noble womanly capacity, whatever others might think.

Helen and several others came around the turn of the woods. They simply joined them, and for the remainder of the afternoon she devoted herself

to the party with a zest that was infectious. Was it because she was happy?

She was asking herself in a perplexed state of mind if she had been too easily won. She had half guessed Bernard Ward's secret, and that he was fighting against some preconceived notion. She knew all her happiness did not depend on marriage until she had elected it for her future lot. She had many other resources, even now. But if she once yielded to the seductive dream, to a companionship that should comprehend one's most sacred nature, to have some one delight in her smiles, her words, her little daily doings, to have hours and days imbued with happiness, not only for a year, but a lifetime! And she knew what it was to her by the pang the thought of death gave.

Edith ran down the road to meet the party on their return, her eyes intense in their longing. "Oh, Aunt Thirza, I thought you never would come," she cried in a tone of tender upbraiding. "Oh, please, Mr. Palmer, let me climb in!"

Thirza was on the front seat and held out her hand. The child scrambled up and seated herself on her aunt's knee. Palmer smiled.

"Was it a very long day?" he asked mirthfully.

"Oh, endless! And I tried to be so good. I

practised my music over and over, and I ate my dinner as I promised."

Edith was very capricious in this respect. The small hand crept round Aunt Thirza's neck. The man sitting back of her envied the nearness. Edith always chattered to Mr. Palmer while she was very shy with most people. When he lifted her out he kissed the eager little face.

"He should have children of his own," Ward thought, with a pang.

They both accepted the invitation to supper, but Thirza was as elusive as a bird, and the only comfort Ward had was the quick rift of color when his eyes intercepted hers.

Palmer proposed an early return, as he was quite sure the ladies were tired. It would be useless to demur, Ward thought. Thirza walked down the path with him, while Palmer went for the horses.

"Oh," she cried, just under her breath, "think well before you decide, for you see I cannot give up Edith now."

"I shall be horribly jealous of her, but that is no new experience. There are so many things to talk over. May I come to-morrow?"

"No; I must work all day. There is another point to consider. Oh, are you quite sure?"

"It is almost seven years since I first saw you," he answered gravely. "A man might be tolerably

sure in that time. To-morrow night, then. Walk down to the great oak at the turn of the road. Let me have a few moments quite alone."

She experienced the shyness of sixteen over her secret. She and Helen sat on the porch a long while in the moonlight, talking of Palmer, but Ward's name was not mentioned. If he had been slow to resolve, he was impatient enough now, as she found the next evening. Edith was in bed, so she was at ease on that score, and Helen had complained of a headache, an unusual thing for her. There was much to discuss about the new house; he would not listen to her plan of purchasing one. At least in this point she might yield to him, and give him the pleasure of providing a shelter for his bonnie bird.

"I shall look about at once," he began. "Why should we wait, or run the risk of any misconstruction?"

"But you are to go away. You need the change."

"Nonsense! As if a change to happiness from uncertainty was not enough!"

"You must go all the same. You must have an opportunity of changing your mind."

"As if you wished me such a miserable fate!"

CHAPTER XVII

FILLING HER PLACE

THIRZA carried her point. Not that she was doubtful of her lover, hardly of herself, though she found her mind in that dangerous state of assent in which she felt that she might presently yield all. She had never considered the delightfulness of giving her own soul, though she had given her time and interest, her strength and her money, for others. But her lover asked none of these except her timé,—with that and her love he was secure. She was glad to shut herself up in her studio for the next fortnight and work with all diligence, as if she dreaded a closer examination of her own purposes. What if she, too, should make a direful mistake! Perhaps she might attain to Clara's complacency—she smiled a little over the ridiculousness of comparing the two men. Clara had been much engrossed with her new house, and, though she would not have confessed it, she did not feel at home with her sister's friends. She had not approved of the plan, but she felt curious to know what Thirza would do next.

"Of course, we should have room enough to take her in now," she said to her mother. "She can't stay in the Palmer house all winter, and the plan of buying is simply ridiculous! It's just announcing herself as an out-and-out old maid! And with that child, there'll be some queer surmises by strangers. But you can't talk any reason into Thirza. I suppose that's the natural result of being a business woman!"

Bernard Ward remained away a few days beyond the fortnight, and then the secret could be no longer kept. Helen Otis was rather puzzled at first, but Mrs. Otis gave it an unqualified approval. Palmer had more than half suspected, and rejoiced heartily with his friend. Mr. Otis joined the party and was warmly welcomed.

"But I can't help wishing it had been Palmer's good fortune," he said. "Why could they not have understood before he took that wretched step!"

"But you see he really suits Thirza better than Mr. Palmer would," said Helen. "She likes the scholarly side. I suppose love settled it, though."

"As it settles most things," said her father, with a smile. But he admitted that Thirza seemed well satisfied. She had indeed adapted herself to the change in her life with very little

friction. She realized that it was generous in her lover to begin his new experience with her brother's child in his household. The point being conceded, she cheerfully strove to make all amends.

Helen and her aunt were to remain until in the autumn; until the marriage, Thirza decided, in order that there should be no present change. Another incident had occurred that quite divided the interest with her affairs. This was Palmer's nomination for assemblyman in his district. It had come about in a manner that surprised even himself, but he hardly knew how strong the influence back of him really was from men tired of political intrigues. They had been discussing it the night before his acceptance, and Miss Otis was an enthusiastic partisan. Then Thirza and her lover had strayed off for a little confidential talk. Palmer rose to go presently. He felt lost now if he did not come over every day or evening.

What would the old house be when they were all away!

"I feel that I shall succeed because you wish me to," he said to Miss Otis. "There are several friends in the town to whom my election will be a sort of triumph over some questionable political intrigues. For their sakes, as well, I hope to be victorious. And I want you to consider, to be-

lieve, that if I ever achieve anything worthy, it will be the result of an impetus given by you the summer we first met. You roused the ambitions lying dormant within me."

Helen Otis gave a proud, sweet smile. She had done some good work then in very ignorance. For an instant she was human enough to hate the woman who had so marred his young manhood.

"Yes, that summer was a revelation to me. I began a new life. I learned, slowly indeed, what manner of man I was, what it was possible for me to become. How and why I should have blundered into such a fatal misstep I cannot now explain. I hope to overlive it and to make the kind of man who will justify any friend's regard. I cannot resist saying this to you. I did not know then that we should ever meet again, but I held you in my mind with a sacredness and honor that has given me courage to attempt a course that if I had not known you might not have seemed possible, and whatever worthy purpose I may achieve will be due to this influence."

He held her hand in a strong, warm clasp, and felt it tremble. Each knew of a wordless sympathy. "Good night!" without raising his eyes to hers. "Heaven bless you!"

She stood still many minutes after he had gone. She heard Thirza's soft laugh from the adjoining

room, and she knew now why Thirza had reached such a great content. For her there was not even years of waiting with a possible hope. If she could have saved him from that snare in the ill-fated summer! Had she cared even then? She experienced a thrill of pride that she had influenced him; that his mistake had not been able to drag him down. Further than that she had no right. She shivered as she said it.

As for Palmer, he strode fiercely down the path, glad of the shelter of darkness. By slow degrees the man within him had evolved. He might have plodded on but for her coming; have been simply a good fellow with a reasonable share of prosperity, and quite content. The advance into the new world of experience and knowledge was fascinating, and he should go onward now. Only some signal success would content him. She was proud of his efforts and spurred him to his best. What would it be to live always under this influence! Some day he would snap the bond that should never have been, that was false to all true manhood and womanhood, and step out from under the shadow. And then —

He stopped suddenly. Had he anything a proud man could offer to such a woman? The deserted husband of another! A legal freedom, to be sure, but would not he often think of the

poor little butterfly dancing her way through the world, and perhaps losing its favor presently? He knew now how so many of these lives ended. What if he should be called upon to rescue her from a fate he could hardly contemplate. Almost like a horrible presentiment a misgiving came to him that she might make some sign when she heard he had attained to a wider sphere. If she should tire of her frivolous aims and return? He had promised the door should be open to her.

He had no right to dream of this other woman; it was sacrilege. After that one impassioned moment when he had realized what she of all others might be to him, he put her image away reverently, a lost possibility in God's keeping.

Westhorpe was a little startled at Thirza's engagement. It had somehow settled to the belief that any business life was incompatible with a woman's marriage. Yet when the first surprise had expended itself there was a very cordial acceptance of the fact. They were glad to have the right to enjoy her successes. And they were the two people of all others to blend in taste and intelligence.

Clara Kent, it must be admitted, was disappointed. She would have preferred Royal Palmer with a divorce, a hundred times over. How Bernard Ward could make anything beyond a comfort-

able living she couldn't see. Even when he was offered a Greek professorship in the new Seminary she could not be appeased.

"Thirza could have done much better if she hadn't been so set on that foolish sort of work. Pictures and all that seem well enough for children, and a book cover doesn't require any great amount of common sense. I only hope Ward won't get disgusted with her ignorance of house-keeping."

But Thirza had attained to the other grand knowledge,—that of home-making. She deferred sufficiently to her sister to be married from her house, though she obstinately decided to go to church in her travelling dress and start at once on a brief journey. The new house had been purchased and was undergoing a few repairs. She sent her belongings there and would go home at once on their return. It was queer, of course, but Thirza was not like other people.

Miss Otis had settled the perplexity about Edith. "Let me take her home with me. She can go on with her music, and the different conditions will enlarge her thoughts and interests. When she returns she will more readily accept the new life and the second place."

"You are very thoughtful." Thirza smiled a little, then colored vividly.

"I am afraid that I am very much in love in the old womanly fashion. I had hardly suspected myself of the power to respond so entirely. Every day is a new revelation, a delicious abandonment of one's self; and it was really generous in Bernard to assent so readily to my interest in Edith. Yes, I shall be very glad to trust her to you. She does not seem to assimilate readily with my sister's children, and Mrs. Kent has her hands so full just now. It is very thoughtful of you."

"I am so interested in her. She is an unusual child."

"I am not sure but that it is a wise dispensation of nature that most people and most children should be simply ordinary. And I am glad to have Edith enlarge her view and appreciation of friends. Yet all this summer I have had only two rivals, — yourself and Mr. Palmer."

Helen flushed and smiled. But it was true. Still Royal Palmer had loved the child devotedly, and with him there had been no ground for jealousy.

Thirza's marriage was not the only topic of discussion. There was a good deal of party spirit and not a little anxiety about the coming election that had gone rather outside of strict party lines. But Palmer had a decided triumph, and with him was the best of the party element. Westhorpe

was proud of his success. He quite expected to hear from Bessie. He shrank from a horrible misgiving that she would propose a half-reconciliation that would admit of her keeping her position as his wife; but no word came. Even when he assumed his new duties at the capitol of his state, she made no sign. There had never been so long an interval of silence on her part. She had been quite used to announcing the special changes of location, but now he did not really know where she was. This was desertion in its plainest sense.

Yet he kept the fact steadily before himself that he would make no move for freedom. To do it and put his fate to the touch and lose, would be more than he could bear. Ignorance was much to be preferred.

When they were all gone, he went back to the old house that held delightful recollections for him. It was no longer lonely. He spent evenings at the piano catching vague strains that floated through his brain with remembered delight. Ah, if the world were full of such women as Helen and Thirza!

The travellers found a warm welcome awaiting them on their return. Judge Brinsley gave them an elegant reception. Bernard Ward seemed to have improved immeasurably during the brief fortnight, and filled his place with charming dignity.

Miss Brinsley took occasion to confide to Thirza that her example had been contagious.

"Most of us have some sentimental episode in youth," she admitted with a faint blush. "Mine was very ordinary. I wonder at it now. An attractive young fellow with no particular aptitude for anything, and whose means were very limited. Papa put him on a two years' probation. He went to the city and found a position, but steady employment was irksome. His restlessness I mistook for ambition, and sympathized profoundly with him. In less than a year he relinquished his claim to my hand in most heroic style and married a pretty girl who was a clerk in a fancy store. I hope they have prospered. I have had a happy and I think useful young womanhood. And now at nine and twenty I shall marry my ideal man, Doctor Lansing. We shall be neighbors, and I hope always the warmest of friends."

Doctor Lansing was five and thirty. He had gained quite a famous reputation in hospital surgery, and broken down in health; that misfortune having brought him to Westhorpe some two or three years previous for quiet and rest. Independent in means, he felt now that he could devote himself to some of his earlier dreams in the intellectual line. He had purchased a lovely

corner residence and been one of the great attractions among marriageable women.

"I am delighted beyond measure; can I say more?" and Thirza smiled charmingly. "And I am honored by the proffer of your friendship."

"The doctor admires Mr. Ward so much. They have spent many an evening over antiquities, and Greek poets, and the knowledges of past ages. We shall have to join forces to keep up our side of modern lore."

Thirza was proud of the compliment to her husband.

They had a few weeks to themselves, and Bernard found the restful charm Seth Rolfe had enjoyed so much without understanding it—Thirza's gift for home-making in its most intelligent aspects. His new position occupied him during the morning only, and he still kept his Greek class at the Academy.

Martha came for maid of all work. Thirza spent her mornings in the studio, occasionally trenching on the afternoon, but it was her intention to keep that and the evening for social purposes.

Her mother came over for a visit, but she felt within her secret soul that she liked the commonplace stir at Clara's much better, with the neighbors running in and out, and the bits of gossip.

“They’re altogether too fine and full of book talk for me,” said the old lady. “Thirza always was different somehow, more like her father.”

“If I was Bernard Ward, I’d put down my foot that Thirza shouldn’t work at pictures and things as if he wasn’t able to maintain her. Miss Miner’s fixed that Greek professorship so the salary is sure. And I just say to everybody that she has no need of working in that fashion,” rejoined Clara.

They heard from Seth, who was enchanted with his new home and settling to ranch life and domesticity with an enthusiasm that Thirza had hardly suspected. Hazel was happy as a bird. Jennie made one of the best of wives, and her letters were really delightful.

Helen Otis missed her little guest very much when, shortly after the holidays, she took her to her new home. She found Thirza and her husband delightfully situated and certainly very happy; and Edith accepted the new order with a grave sweetness that won her uncle’s regard, since he understood now how firmly his supremacy was established.

Helen knew her father desired most of all a happy marriage for her. She had come to appreciate the wisdom of his choice, and the added interest it had given to the home while it left her with a great deal of freedom. Aunt Margaret

was a cherished member of the household. She found many things to engross her attention. She had some charms to offer society, and was sought out for many social occasions. There were numerous good works without taking up any aggressive warfare on established regulations. Ardently as she had longed to fill an especial place, to take up a line that indicated genius, she admitted to herself, at first with a secret mortification, but now quite frankly, that she had no particular gift, but a fine appreciation of all the higher gifts, that made her a charming and fascinating companion.

Mrs. Otis was much interested in the enlightenment and progression of women, and in the charities of the day. Helen felt that she really owed to her influence the breadth of thought her father was acquiring, and she knew now that, sweet and fond as youth might be in its devotion, it lacked the power and concentration of mature years.

It was curiously interesting to follow Thirza in her new life, to note now and then some change of opinion, to find her love for her husband growing deeper and richer as they understand each other better. She was amused and touched as well by some delicate little rhapsody of love that seemed to flow unconsciously from her pen. Bernard's tastes were so true and delicate, now they were reading this poet, now that. Bernard had

brought home some fine critical article from Doctor Lansing, or Mrs. Lansing has started some intellectual discussion at the Club. Edith was doing very well, but she was unchildlike.

"She does need companions of her own age," wrote Thirza. "She is too much with grown people. Yet we meet so few children that she likes or will even tolerate. Bernard is very generous to his small rival, for I find that I love her more as the days go on. Yet in the course of a few years I hope to summon courage enough to send her to some nice school that she may have the experience of girl friendships."

Helen smiled a little, as she read part of the letter to her mother.

"She must come to us for another visit," said Mrs. Otis. "She is very exigent, yet by no means a disagreeable child. But I think we need not fear that Thirza will allow any influence to interfere with her devotion to her husband. She is very much in love, and with a nature that answers hers, the bond between them will be strengthened by many fine ties that an intimate knowledge will develop. It was a really fortunate thing that they did not begin life together in earlier youth. There will be no disenchantment now."

No, youth was not always wise. For such a perfect understanding one could afford to wait.

She was glad also to hear that Royal Palmer had acquitted himself bravely and honorably in his new responsibilities. He had been sent to make a bold stand against certain political intrigues, and though at first he seemed leading a forlorn hope, before the close of the session many who had hesitated to avow their true opinions at first, followed him. And on his return he had been congratulated by a fine reception at Judge Brinsley's, and a cordial recognition of his courage and ability. A more vigorous life seemed marked out for him.

CHAPTER XVIII

THE BUTTERFLY'S BRIEF SUMMER

MRS. OTIS had been much interested through the winter in a Home for convalescents undertaken by some kindly women, among whom were two enthusiastic young physicians. There seemed a great need of a house of rest for girls and women who had no comfortable place to spend the interim between the Hospital discharge and the establishment of normal strength to enable them to take up the daily work of life again.

One morning early in May Helen wended her way thither, being on the list of helpers for that week. The Home was not able to dispense with this kindly assistance as yet.

"Oh," the matron exclaimed, "you are just the one we want to come and read. There are three poor women who cannot use their eyes. So few people read well, and among the patients no one has a really good voice. Miss Guyon was here yesterday, and they enjoyed her so much."

Helen expressed her willingness, and laid aside her wraps. Then they entered a large, airy

room, very simply furnished, but with several easy chairs. Two women sat sewing, both recovering from a severe attack of bronchitis. One still had her arm in a sling. Two others had a shade over their eyes; but one, who sat in a high-backed rocker by the window, glanced up at the sound of the footsteps, yet her eyes seemed to wander about vaguely.

Helen gave a sudden start.

"That poor girl has been badly burned," explained Mrs. Laird. "Mrs. Van Cort brought her here. Some friends pay a generous board for her, but I believe her case has not been positively decided upon. She was an actress, and met with a sad accident. The burns are healed, and her hair is beginning to grow again. She can distinguish light and darkness with one eye, and she counts confidently on having her sight restored; but the doctors at the hospital thought it doubtful."

Mrs. Laird shook her head in a slow fashion, as if it was certainty rather than doubt. Helen had a sudden impulse to excuse herself, to say that Mrs. Otis would come in her stead in the afternoon. Then she remembered her mother had an engagement. In a tone she vainly tried to render steady, she asked the name of the unfortunate girl.

"Fay Western is what she was registered at

the hospital. Her company, I believe, were on the eve of going abroad when the accident occurred, and have gone now, but this provision was made for her. She is so young, too — not much beyond twenty. What will you do — read aloud for the next hour? This room is very much interested in one of the new novels. You cannot hold their attention by anything else.”

“Yes, I will read.” She looked curiously toward Miss Western. Was there any other similarity except that Bessie Palmer was an actress in her fashion? But Fay Western was not her stage name.

The girl turned her chair slightly, when Helen had fairly begun. The eyes seemed to wander in her direction, and an intent expression clouded the face still red and discolored, and Helen had a presentiment that sent a shiver through every pulse, a protest she could not understand. Some occult power seemed to impel her to watch. She was not easily tired, and read on to the end. Her listeners drew a long breath of satisfaction, and at once there was a flood of exclamations, approval and criticisms. The girl in the corner with her slow-moving eyes said nothing, but peered curiously at the reader. She shook off the nurse's hand, laid lightly on her arm, and made her way over to the visitor as the dinner bell sounded.

Helen Otis gave a gasp. With all the disfigurement there were traces of Bessie Deane.

"You don't know me! Am I so horribly changed? I recognized your voice. I—"

"You are Bessie Deane; at least, you were when I knew you."

"And I'm so solitary now, I'm glad to see any one. I want to ask you ever so many things."

"After dinner, then," returned Helen, gravely.

Bessie scarcely ate anything. Helen was down at the foot of the table, and felt Bessie's vain efforts to single her out.

"Then you know this Miss Western?" said the nurse later on. "She is eager to see you alone, and is waiting in the reception-room." Thither went Helen, with a strange feeling of repugnance. Oh, why had fate sent her here just at this juncture? If only she had remained in ignorance!

Bessie put out her hand. That was scarred as well, and two fingers badly drawn. "I thought at first that I didn't want any one to know," she began—"any one at Westhorpe, I mean. The doctors said that after a little I wouldn't be scarred much. Do you think it will all go away? I had such a beautiful skin, you remember," and she sighed. "My hair is growing;

does it look as if it would be golden as before? It was horrible, and all to be done in a moment!"

"How did it happen?" Helen's tone was unconsciously strained, and she felt a shrinking in every nerve. She could not suddenly assume a tenderness, though she pitied her profoundly.

"I was all dressed in gauze for my part. It was just elegant, and I had made a success with the dance. I was to go to London with a new company. It would have been splendid," and Bessie began to cry.

"My poor child!" Helen was moved in spite of her aversion.

"We were all in the green room. It was at L——, and there were lamps on one dressing-table. How it happened no one quite knew, but I am sure it was the fault of that nasty, clumsy pug that belonged to the star. The table tipped over, and the blaze flashed up in my face, and all was in confusion. Some one covered me, but the heat and smoke—oh, it was horrible! That was what hurt my eyes. The burns were not so deep, and everything was done right away. I was partly unconscious, and they said at first it wouldn't be very bad." Her lips quivered pitifully and she began to cry again, but it was simply bewailing her lost

prettiness. "They had to go away without me. It was such a splendid company, and I wanted to go abroad. I had been a real success, and Violet Fair was ever so jealous after a while; but her husband ran away with Rose O'Mara, and then she made much of me again. She's in the new company. Oh, don't you think I will be able to go back? I should want to die if I could not."

Helen was silent. There was no apparent promise.

"I've been here a week. I'm about well, now, and when the redness gets out of my skin—does it look very bad? You know I can't see clearly. The doctors are coming to-morrow to decide what can be done with my eyes. You know they can do almost anything now by operations. Then I'll go away and get recruited up through the summer. I shouldn't mind Westhorpe, for a while, although it's so poky. Thirza Rolfe is married. I saw it in the paper. A New York club gave her a reception. Did you see her then?"

"Yes," answered Helen, with a long inspiration.

"It's that Ward who used to come when you were there. How long ago it seems! You'll visit her, I suppose? And maybe you'll see him, Mr. Palmer, I mean, and the old house. I wanted him

to get a divorce, but I don't think he has. I used to write, but I haven't in ever so long. I've been earning my own living," with an odd little laugh of pride.

The same thoughtless, indifferent, pleasure-loving nature! She recounted her triumphs; she could have married half a dozen times, but she didn't mean to take stage men. She liked the good time and the little suppers, the compliments and gifts, and all she asked was to get well and go back.

Helen went home with a strange contradictory feeling at her heart. Was it right to hope fervently, to pray, almost, that Bessie would recover? She was very nervous the next morning. She went laden with flowers, and the gratitude touched her. She played, sang, and read some amusing magazine stories. One figure was missing. What would be the verdict?

Helen could not remain after twelve, on account of some friends who would be at luncheon. In the hall she met the nurse, whose face told the story.

"Oh, Miss Otis!" she exclaimed, "that poor thing is going on like a crazy creature! There's no hope for her. She has buoyed herself up by the few encouraging words they have doled out, though I didn't see how she could. Do you know

any of her friends? So young, and to be blind all her days! I have a fancy her family opposed her going on the stage?"

"They did," Helen said in a low tone.

"I am glad you know about her. Poor helpless thing! Can't you write to her friends?"

"Let us wait a few days," Miss Otis replied. How strange she should be drawn into this girl's destiny again, to aid in restoring her to her husband, just as she had in some sort given her to her lover. Had she cared for Palmer then? She remembered the day on the mountain when they had escaped danger by such a little. Would any word of hers have kept him from marrying Bessie? And must her hand lay the burthen back on his life?

There were several days in which she seemed to herself like one in a dream. Even Mrs. Otis remarked it at length. Was it because a year of probation Helen had assented to rather unwillingly was drawing to an end? But she should not be persuaded into a marriage that would not absorb the best affection she could bestow.

It was several days before she saw Bessie, who had kept her room in spite of persuasion. Helen went thither by request.

"You know what they said?" She stretched out both hands with the uncertainty of one quite blind.

"There is nothing to be done. No skill can give me back my sight. And life is worthless."

"Oh, not quite!"

"Yes, that was the only kind of life I cared for. That was life. It was delight, gladness, gayety. And it is all ended! Perhaps not quite all. I have my voice and I could dance, blind. But there is no one—and you can do nothing without money. At first—it seems as if it was a month ago they told me—I begged them to give me something; I wanted to die. I resolved to kill myself as soon as I could. They watched me day and night. And then a horrible fear came over me;" and she shuddered. "I am afraid to die—to go out in the darkness—as Aunt Hannah did. Strange, isn't it, that the same thing should come to me?"

"But I'm not going to die. It will take me a long time to get well, longer than I thought. A year, perhaps more, before my hair has grown out nicely and my skin gets fair and smooth. And I've no friends and nowhere to go, and my little money will soon be spent. There is only one way—he asked me to come back when I was tired of it all. Oh, I should never have grown tired!" with a long sigh of delight. "But he is very easy and good, beside he is my husband. I've never done anything reprehensible. I never believed in

their love; I don't think I really know how to love any one."

And yet she had declared with tears in her eyes that she loved Palmer. She could coolly plan to go back to him in her need! It was well she could not see the indignant eyes that studied her with a kind of abhorrence.

"So when I decided I could not kill myself, I realized this was the only resource left. I'd a hundred times rather care for myself, but you see I can't now. And—I can't write—beside, he might think it a hoax. So I want you to write and ask him to come. He will know then it is the truth."

"I—write?" Her voice was unsteady with emotion.

"Yes. People talk of Providence, you know. I think you were directed or impelled to come here. I had thought of Thirza Rolfe, but it is better that you should do it. Tell him of the dreadful accident and that I am blind." She began to cry softly, pathetically.

"Promise me!" catching Helen's hand.

"I will write." Helen's voice had a strained, unnatural sound, but Bessie was too intent upon her own plans to remark it.

Write this sad story to him that would move him immeasurably, knowing the little tenderness or

regret that prompted it! She said to herself that she could not, but after she had discussed the matter with her mother they decided it was the only course.

"And just when he is beginning such a fine career! I can't understand how a man's life, or a woman's either, should be wrecked from a noble impulse. It doesn't seem just." Helen was glad to have her mother put this protest in words.

It was a hard thing to do, and yet simple enough when once said. She asked him at Bessie's request, she said, without making any comment. For a day or two she almost wondered if he would come, but she need not have done so.

Yet no one knew the fiery trial that rent Royal Palmer's soul. He held the note in his fingers a minute or two. Helen Otis' handwriting! What if they wanted to come back for another golden summer! His heart beat with an unwonted delight. He had quite accustomed himself to the idea of legal freedom. There was no question now but that he could come up to a height that would reflect honor upon any woman. And he was proud of the long record of creditable names behind him. He had rather smiled over one's pride in ancestors, but now it was a gratification.

Then he opened the letter. He could have kissed the words her hand had traced in his sudden

transport. But ere his lips touched the paper his eyes caught his wife's name. Oh, what was this!

He knew then he had been cherishing a sweet dream that must be ruthlessly strangled if he meant to hold on to an upright manhood. There was a powerful temptation to provide for this woman who had so lightly thrown aside her marriage bond. Would a generous provision quiet his conscience and bring him the freedom an honorable man would desire? There were such divorces and lovely women accepted the men afterward. But he knew in his secret soul Helen Otis would not. Neither would Thirza Rolfe. Judge Brinsley had been very outspoken upon this point. Yet it was not so much what the world would say as the one woman who had become his ideal of what was best and finest in womanhood.

Could he accept this destiny? To take up the burthen of this helpless, inconsequent, dissatisfied child for years, for a whole lifetime, perhaps. It would be a continual struggle, a daily warfare. It would interfere with his plans for self-advancement. The home would be so much more satisfactory with solitude than this haunting presence.

He wondered now why he had been so pitiful that night, so blind to his own interests. Did ever generosity reap such a bitter harvest before? If

he had peremptorily sent Bessie back to her room the whole tragedy might have been averted.

There are many mysteries in life without any apparent solution, many fine endeavors that seem to get travestied in the very acceptance. Honor bade him accept the burthen without questioning the future.

He paced the floor until long past midnight. He knew what he should do, but it was a hard struggle to bring his mind into any sort of accord. What if her presence should prove distasteful to him and he should grow to hate her?

Ah, if he accepted the duty he had no right to hate.

He went directly to the pleasant Otis home. That and Thirza's were ideal places to him. He had not dared to discuss the matter with Mrs. Ward lest she should touch his course with the poignancy of regret. And he was sincerely glad to see Mrs. Otis alone and learn that Helen was really out shopping with some friends, and was not forced to any conventional excuse.

Mrs. Otis listened and approved. Helen had judged him rightly then. Together they went to the Home and she spent the time among the inmates while the husband and wife were settling this melancholy question.

Another woman might have been embarrassed.

He was glad at this crisis that she did not appeal to any lingering claim of love, the poor mistaken spark that had proved a false light. His pity was aroused by her helpless condition. There was no other refuge for her. He did not even feel hurt that she saw it in the same light, that she admitted so frankly she would a hundred times rather have her stage life. It was what she was eminently fitted for. And he could have cried out in his anguish — "Oh, why had this happened to her? Why should this commonplace soul touch the borders of tragedy continually?"

In a certain way she justified her asking. She was his wife, she had never broken her marriage vow. He had asked her to return in any stress of trouble, and this was great indeed. It would be quiet and secluded on the old farm, all she wanted now was rest. She would be quite content.

Her poor face and sightless eyes pleaded powerfully for her. And if he forgave her lack of wife-ness, why not do it grandly! So one warm spring day, just at early evening, he carried her up the path in his arms as he had the night she first came. He almost listened for Aunt Hannah's voice, but the kindly German woman had only pity for her.

Yet after a few days when she began to find her way about, a touch of awesomeness fell over

her, a shadowy something that haunted her like a ghost. She seemed to listen for Aunt Hannah's step. She shrank and grieved, lest out of the silence should come some upbraiding. Was she answerable for anything? Had a strange judgment come upon her?

She clung curiously to her husband. He was a busy man and much away, and then the hours seemed insupportable. She would lock herself in her room and go through with the old enchanting poses, but there were no plaudits, neither could she see her grace of motion as she often had in the glass. She refused herself to callers. Even Thirza's occasional visits were distasteful to her. The only hope was, if she could regain her good looks, she might make a success again as the "beautiful blind dancer." In imagination she saw the words on a brilliant poster. Surely some one would take her up. Friends were easily made, if as easily lost.

She was gaining strength; she felt that. "Roy," she said one afternoon when he was lingering about the house, "I am so wretched and lonely. Don't you think I might go out?" plaintively.

"Why, yes; you ought. Jack will drive you any time."

"That's no pleasure. You might take me and

tell me what there was to see. Oh, Roy, you don't know the awful loneliness in being blind."

"Yes, I will take you," he answered in a soft tone, touched by her appeal.

She felt her way to the window. "Roy," with a slight hesitation, "tell me truly how I look. Is my face scarred any? Has the redness all gone out?"

He seldom looked at her critically, but he did now. The long, bronze-brown lashes shadowed her cheeks, and her skin was clear and fine. Her golden hair, a trifle darker now, clung in wavy tendrils about her brow, and the sweet curved lips were tremulous with expectation. She was very pretty, only the upraised eyes were dull and had no pleading in them, such as had once been his undoing.

"You are really lovely," he said. "Your complexion is beautiful. There are no traces of the accident except when you get flushed."

"Oh, Roy!" She flung her arms around his neck and kissed him.

All this time he had been living in soul with his ideal, never swerving from that wordless adoration he called truth. She had not demanded any tenderness; he had not proffered it. He was giving her a home protection, kindest care, but love would never be possible.

"You are so good, Roy. The men of the world are not like you. I wish I had been different. Or if I had only known then I could succeed, I might have gone on the stage at once. I can't make myself over and change my likes and wants, but haven't you a little bit of the old love left for me?"

He kissed her and held her in his arms a long while. Had he any right to an ideal while she was his wife?

"Get ready and we will go out together," he said huskily. She had a maid who waited on her and dressed her, and who took her out for exercise. She came down on the old porch and he lifted her into the phaeton. If she proffered her love again, had he any right to refuse?

Yet there was a great struggle within the man. How could he profane the sacred name of love, now that he understood it in its grand entirety? She would never be capable of the heights to which he soared. But was not he leading a double life? He put no one's name in these hours of wordless worship and Helen Otis would never know. But was it not laying a sinful adoration at her feet?

He gave up nearly all society again, only rarely dropping in at the Wards where he had been such a frequent and welcome visitor.

Thirza remarked it and questioned him.

"I think Bessie needs me more," he answered gravely.

"She is well?" hesitatingly.

"Oh, quite well. She is rousing herself to a greater interest, but she shrinks from mingling with people. I just begin to realize how terrible a thing blindness is. I do not think she sees at all now. Thirza, pray that I may have strength to the end." The anguish in his voice pierced her.

Bessie did indeed take a sudden turn. She dressed in her prettiest gowns and sat on the porch awaiting him. She appealed to him with a host of trivial questions, she longed for praise and flattery, she recounted her triumphs, and made him put away his book or paper and listen. Then she grew jealous and questioned him about the people he met. What was Thirza like in her own home? Was Miss Otis coming this summer?

"I have not been there for a fortnight," he replied. Would Helen Otis come? Oh, he hoped not. He found the exigent little lady needed a great deal of patience. He almost longed again for her indifference. She was very fitful. The old haunted feeling came back to her. When Roy was about, Aunt Hannah seemed to disappear.

"Roy," she said one evening, "let us go somewhere else and live."

"At a hotel?"

"Couldn't you go to some other city?"

He drew a long breath. "It would not be possible with my business interests here. But I might send you somewhere."

"Me? I can't go alone. I feel safest with you. Aunt Hannah's ghost has taken possession of this place. She hated me from the beginning."

"Oh, no, you are quite mistaken."

"Yes, she did. She can't even rest in her grave. Oh!" And Bessie threw up one arm with a little cry.

"What is it? Bessie, that is only a disordered imagination. You must not fancy such things."

"That was a pain in my side. It takes my breath away, but it's over now. I don't see Aunt Hannah; if I did, I think I should die. But I can *feel* her presence. She's afraid of you. She never molests me when you are here."

"We will take a little journey after two or three weeks," he said gently.

"You are very good to me, and I'm a nuisance. But it's horrible to be blind."

"Yes, dear," and he kissed her.

She must not get fond of him or it would be hard to go away. But she would tire of years with the things he loved. The thought haunted her day and night of the furore about a "beautiful

blind dancer." She would be able to hear the applause.

Was this throb in every pulse for him, he wondered? remarking her new animation.

Helen heard from her friend frequently.

"Bessie Palmer is improving and growing strangely beautiful," she wrote. "She drives about with her husband, but takes no part whatever in social life, and I think is weaning him from it. And he had just begun such a fine career. Strange how these women, with no intellectual qualities, can absorb a man and drain his best blood, weaken his noblest ambitions! Bernard is most anxious about him. They are to go away and the house will be shut up. I have a curious feeling about the place, as if sometime I would like to own it."

The Otis family were still lingering in the city. Helen's admirer had returned, and was not inclined to take a negative answer. He was eligible in every respect, and that he loved her was beyond question. Mr. Otis admired him. Why could she not yield that one stubborn little strand, so strong, and yet unimportant—let herself love him? For if she gave up—

"I shall not cease to hope until you assure me of your love for another," he said.

She might have cared, she told herself. There

had been a tempting possibility. But she was too well balanced to lean to a side she could not approve, in which there was a taint of wrong. Yet she could not wholly disguise from herself that it was Palmer's influence that held her back, that made her consider so scrupulously.

"A letter from Mrs. Ward," said Mrs. Otis, with the mail in her hand.

"And I have not answered Thirza's last letter. Oh, I hope there is no bad news!"

She read a few lines and uttered a little cry.

Mrs. Otis glanced up in alarm.

"It is about Bessie," Helen rarely said Mrs. Palmer. "She is gone—on her last journey. It was very unexpected. They had been out driving and he placed her in a veranda chair while he took the horses down to the barn. Then he came to carry her up-stairs, thinking she had fainted, but she never breathed or stirred again. An unexpected heart weakness, the doctor said. Poor Bessie! One can lament her strange purposeless life, a butterfly's life and a butterfly's death. Why are such people sent into the world? Is there not such a thing as being in the wrong place after all? How curiously we have been connected with the tragedy. Yet it may have developed Royal Palmer in some mysterious manner. Do you know, Helen, I think him a hero, and yet in my

unreasoning and inexperienced youth I did him scant justice.

"They were preparing to go away. He had just resolved to give up political life that had begun to interest him so much. Judge Brinsley was quite indignant about it. Is it wrong to be thankful that the frivolous soul has no more power to starve and wreck the finer one?"

Helen Otis kept a long vigil that night and wrote her lover his final answer. She would not add another to the long list of women who condoned their mistakes with the mantle of sympathy and never attained to the royal robe of love. If the life she had influenced so subtly ever came to her, she would accept; otherwise there would be work and happiness won from true endeavor.

THE END

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